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Perfecting Polenta









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Cover photo, Mark Thomas; inset, Brian Hagiwara. This page: top, Beth Galton; middle, Dennis Gottlieb; bottom, Melanie Acevedo.

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If you'd like to share your thoughts on topics like genetically engineered tomatoes, our most recent baking article, or your food and cooking philosophies, here's the place to do so. Send your comments to Letters, Fine Cooking, PO Box 5506, Newtown, CT 06470-5506.

Keep grit out of lettuce

I've just reviewed the April/ May issue (Fine Cooking #8) of your great-looking magazine. I was delighted to see your Food Science column by Shirley Corriber and the article on wild greens, a much-neglected topic in food magazines in general ("Delighting in Wild Greens," p. 54). I also liked the tips that people send in.

As for the tip on washing lettuce by running the head under the tap: I do hope this idea does not spread. I have seen more cooks wash lettuce in this manner and have eaten more gritty lettuce and other greens, in both restaurants and private homes, than I care to remember. Greens

have to be submerged so that the gritty particles can fall away from the leaves to the bottom of the bowl or sink. Also, in many parts of the country, there are water limitations and costs.

> —Diana Kennedy, Michoacan, Mexico

Evocative sauces and electronic sources

Your article on cooking with flowers (Fine Cooking #7, p. 65), and especially the recipe for rose-petal chicken breasts, is reminiscent of the book and film Like Water for Chocolate. You may remember that the banquet of quail with rose-petal sauce was an aphrodisiac, causing one of the film's more memorable moments, a scene in which a beautiful woman runs nude through a meadow and is picked up by a soldier on horseback. I recreated the recipe and had my horse at the ready, but alas, I had no such luck.

Since you are online, are you aware of any mailing lists, user groups, etc., relating to cooking and recipes?

—Steve Mosenson, (mosenson@ad.com)

Editors' reply: All the commercial online services are fertile terrain for food- and winerelated information, ranging from bulletin boards, where you can exchange food talk with other users, to Consumer Reports ratings, food articles from the New York Times, and the Zagat Restaurant Guide. For starters, try these services:

- ◆ CompuServe (800/524-3388): The Cook's Online Forum; Zagat Restaurant Guide.
- ◆ America Online (800/827-6364): Cooking Club; The New York Times.
- ◆ Prodigy (800/776-3449): Consumer Reports; Food Bulletin Board; Wine, Beer & Spirits Bulletin Board; Zagat Restaurant Guide.

If you're serious about learning to navigate the online services, look for a new book by Gary Holleman, Food & Wine Online (Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1995). The paperback contains 17 chapters of easyto-read information that will get you started and keep you going, far into culinary cyberspace. If you discover something that's really useful or really fun (or both), send us the location and a description.

Good wheat-free bread recipes

I'd like to recommend More from the Gluten-Free Gourmet to your readers for its selection of wheat-free bread-machine recipes. This cookbook is invaluable for celiacs (those who cannot eat foods containing gluten), and these recipes

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make very tasty breads. Written by Bette Hagman, this 1993 book is available from Henry Holt & Company.

Thanks for making an e-mail address available.

—Kirsten Klinghammer, West Lafayette, IN

Where's the fire in chiles?

One of the most often repeated culinary misconceptions is that the seeds in chile peppers are either the principal or a significant source of heat. This misapprehension was, perhaps unintentionally, aided and abetted in the article "The Right Techniques for Fresh Chiles," in Fine Cooking #9 (Basics, p. 77).

The article stated, "An alkaloid, capsaicin is distributed throughout the chile, but the heaviest concentration of capsaicin is found in the white pith on the inside of the chile—those ribs that hold the seeds in place. Further down on the scale of concentration are the seeds and then the chile's flesh, which has the least amount of capsaicin."

According to Dave De-Witt, author of *The Whole Chile Pepper Book* (Little, Brown, 1990, p. 238), "The heat source of chile peppers, capsaicin, is produced by glands at the junction of the

placenta and the pod wall. The capsaicin spreads unevenly throughout the inside of the pod and is concentrated mostly in the placental tissue. The seeds are not sources of heat, as commonly believed. However, because of their proximity to the placenta, the seeds do occasionally absorb capsaicin through the processing procedure. For every hundred parts of capsaicin in the placental tissue, there are six parts in the rest of the fruit tissue, and four parts in the seeds." Jean Andrews reaches essentially the same conclusion on p. 57 of Peppers (University of Texas Press, 1984).

The scientific conclusion that the seeds contain the *least* amount of piquancy (if any at all) can be informally confirmed by carefully removing some seeds, rinsing them, and then chewing them. When I have done this, I have found little or no heat. There are certainly good reasons to remove the seeds from chiles, including their unpleasant texture



taste, but controlling the heat doesn't seem to be one of them.

—James W. Peyton, San Antonio, TX

Editors' reply: We're taking a lot of heat for getting that one wrong. Thanks to all the readers who wrote to set us straight.

Great grilled vegetables, with lower fat

Thank you for running the very comprehensive article on grilling vegetables (*Fine Cooking #*10, p. 24). Molly Stevens really knows her subject. Too often, articles on grilling throw in a vegetable as a "politically correct" afterthought. Now the recommended "five-a-day" is easy—on the grill, I'll make it ten.

I use a different method to lightly coat my vegetables in oil to prevent sticking and drying out. This contributes an insignificant amount of fat and calories, but it does the trick. Swish 1 or 2 teaspoons of your favorite oil in about a quart of cold water. Turn the vegetables in this rinse, drain them well, and grill. Herbs, salt, and seasonings can be sprinkled on immediately or after grilling.

—Susan Asanovic, M.S.R.D., Wilton, CT

Errata

♦ Marty Nachel, the author of "Choosing a Beer to Complement Any Dish (Fine Cooking #10, pp. 54–58) noted a couple of editing errors in the article. The statement on p. 56, "The first 90 days are the best of a beer's life, but most remain quite drinkable for a year," is only half true; except in rare instances, beer becomes stale-tasting after 90 days.

Also, Marty wanted us to emphasize the point made under the heading "Beer in Your Neighborhood" that most food-worthy beers used to be imported. As Marty reminded us, "American microbreweries now produce every beer style known to man and sell them at a level of freshness that importers cannot possibly duplicate."

◆ We made a mistake in the weight-to-volume conversions for chopped chocolate or chocolate chips in "Mix Flavors and Textures in Triple-Layered Dessert Bars" (Fine Cooking #10, pp. 48–51). The cup measures are correct as published, but the weights were wrong. The correct conversions are as follows: 1 cup equals 6 ounces; 1½ cups equals 9 ounces; 2 cups equals 12 ounces. ◆

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Bertolli Dolce Pane con Zucchine

3 cups flour 3 cups shredded, unpeeled

1 1/2 cups sugar zucchini

1 1/2 cups dark raisins 2 tsp. cinnamon 1 tsp. salt 1 1/2 cups golden raisins

1 tsp. baking powder
1 tsp. baking soda
2 tsp. vanilla
3 large eggs
1 cup Bertolli Extra Light Olive Oil

In a large bowl mix together the flour, sugar, cinnamon, salt, baking powder, baking soda, zucchini, raisins and nuts. In another bowl beat together the eggs, vanilla and olive oil. Pour over flour mixture and stir until thoroughly mixed. Pour batter into 12 greased individual Bundt'lette® molds to 2/3 full. Bake at 350°F for 30-35 minutes or until toothpick comes out clean or pour batter into two 9x5-inch loaf pans, baking at 350°F for 1 hour and 20 minutes.

Lemon Icing

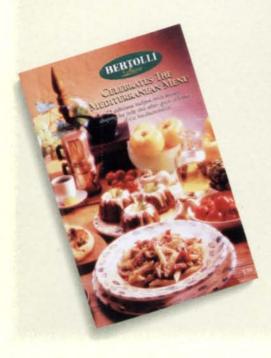
1 1/2 cups confectioners' sugar

1 tsp. lemon zest

3 Tbsp. lemon juice

1 Tbsp. Bertolli Extra Light Olive Oil

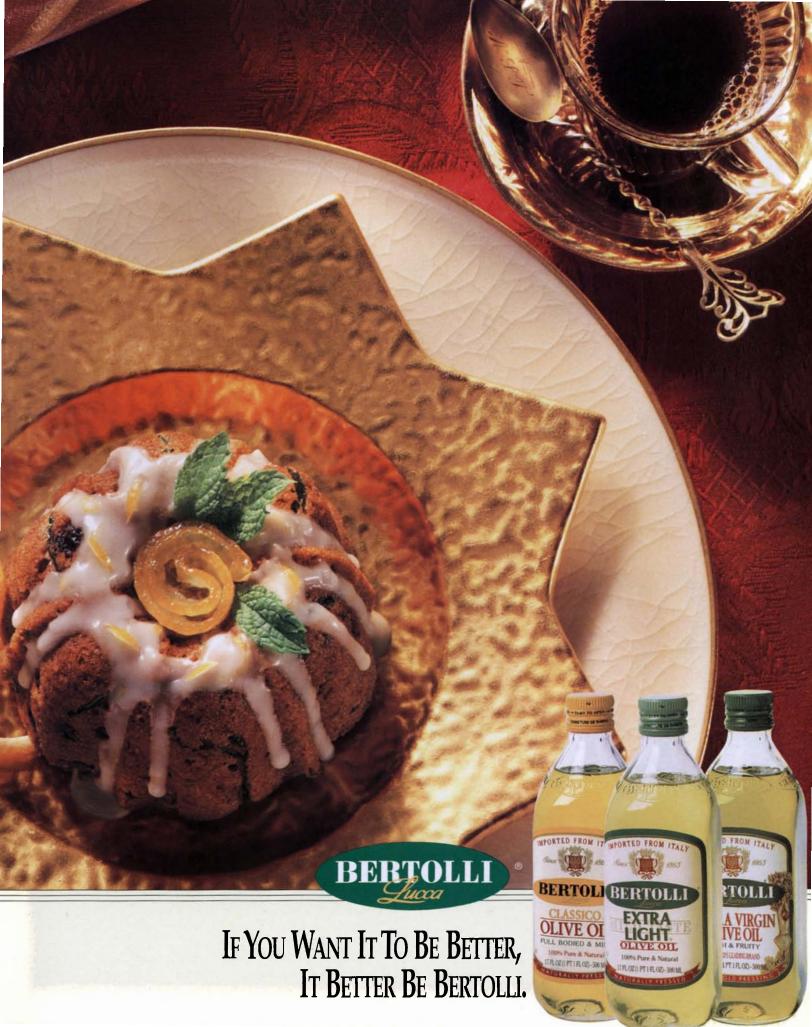
In a small bowl, combine all icing ingredients. Drizzle on room-temperature cake.





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You'll know a crisp-ripe Fuyu by its squat, four-lobed shape. Less messy than a soft Hachiya, these slice neatly and have the texture of a plum.

Firm for slicing or jelly-soft, these luscious fruits are at their peak in winter

The acornshaped Hachiya persimmon is the most common astringent variety and accounts for 90% of California's commercial production.

BY JEFF DAWSON

'd never seen a persimmon tree until I moved into a house with a beautiful, 40-foot tall one just outside the kitchen window. As fall arrived that first year, my wife and I watched with delight as the tree shed its leaves to reveal brightorange fruits hanging from the bare branches like Chinese lanterns.

Eager for a taste of our home-grown fruit, I picked a

firm, flame-orange persimmon and took a bite. My mouth puckered up and I spit the pulp out on the ground. Later I learned that tannins make all but the softest persimmons inedible. A ripe persimmon is pudding soft, and its flavor is pure ambrosia. If you've never tasted one before, imagine something like a plum crossed with a honey-sweet winter squash.

American persimmons grow wild and are not cultivated commercially. They are small—about the size of a



Like bright ornaments decorating a bare tree, persimmons cling to their branches long after the leaves have fallen.

plump cherry. The persimmons you'll find in stores were first cultivated in Asia. Most are grown in California, but persimmons from Chile often turn up in the off season.

Asian persimmons come in both astringent and nonastringent varieties. Astringent persimmons are soft when ripe. As I discovered when I first bit into one, harsh tannins make this type of persimmon inedible unless it is fully ripened. As the fruit matures, the tannins soften, the sugars develop, and the luscious flavors of the

fruit come forward. Hachiya is the most common astringent variety.

The easiest way to enjoy an astringent-type persimmon is to simply cut off the top leaf stem from a very ripe fruit and eat the delectably messy pulp with a spoon.

Nonastringent varieties, sometimes called crisp persimmons, are becoming more widely available in American markets. Identified by their flattened, four-lobe shape, their flesh is free of puckercausing tannins. Because they're firm when ripe, crisp

persimmons can be neatly sliced and used in compotes and fruit salads.

Fuyu is the most common firm-ripe persimmon. Some, called Giant Fuyus, weigh as much as a pound. Another firm variety, called Chocolate persimmon because of its brown-streaked skin, has rich-flavored flesh. There's also a crisp persimmon from Israel called a Sharon fruit.

Persimmons will ripen slowly at room temperature. To hurry the process along, put the fruit in a paper bag with a ripe banana or apple: the persimmon will be ready to eat in three to six days. Once ripened, persimmons can be refrigerated briefly. Freezing is sometimes recommended as a way to ripen persimmons, but freezing won't remove all the tannins and the fruit will remain unpleasantly bitter. A frozen perfectly ripe persimmon, however, makes a refreshing sherbet-like dessert.

Jeff Dawson is the garden director of the Fetzer Vineyards Food & Wine Center in Hopland, California. ◆





Chinois

Why a \$100 sieve may be worth the money

I've seen many recipes that suggest using a "chinois" for straining, and I was thinking of buying one until I discovered the price. What is the advantage of this coneshaped colander, and could it be worth the cost?

—Al Ammons, Nantucket, MA

Steven Bridge replies: A chinois has several advantages. Its conical shape permits gravity to make easy work of straining liquids, and its extremely fine mesh means it can strain almost anything—even separating the seeds from raspberries. Chinois are often recommended for straining sauces and stocks because the mesh allows the cook to extract the maximum amount of liquid with a minimum of sediment. You can use a pestle, whisk, or ladle to push out the last drop of liquid without pushing out any of the solids.

A less expensive conical strainer, the china cap, has similar uses; however, its design of holes punched in metal makes it a better tool for less delicate straining. A china cap is also good for puréeing soft foods like cooked apples and white beans by pushing the food through the holes with a ladle or pestle.

Both the chinois and the china cap are expensive tools. A high-quality stainless-steel chinois 8 inches in diameter will cost about \$100, and a 10-inch-diameter china cap will cost about \$45. If you like perfectly smooth soups

and sauces or crystal-clear bouillon, however, a chinois is a hard tool to beat. Steven Bridge is the director of catalog sales for Bridge Kitchenware in New York City.

Without boiling water, pasta is mush

Why do pasta directions call for waiting until the water is boiling before adding the pasta? Wouldn't the pasta cook faster if it got a head start by being in the water while it was heating up?

> —Gabrielle Dunleavy, Seattle, WA

Norman Levitz replies: Pasta added to water before it starts to boil gets a head start on mushiness. Pasta quickly begins to break down in tepid water as the starch dissolves. You need the intense heat of boiling water to "set" the outside of the pasta, which prevents the pasta from sticking together and forming an impenetrable lump. That's why the rolling boil is so important: the water temperature drops when you add the pasta, but if you have a furious boil, the water will still be hot enough for the pasta to cook properly.

Norman Levitz is the corporate chef for the Putney Pasta Company in Chester, Vermont.

No more brown avocados or gray quacamole

What makes a cut avocado turn brown?

—Alan Claude, Jacksonville, FL

Shirley O. Corriber replies: Cut avocados turn brown for the same reason that cut peaches and apples darken: the oxidation of phenolic compounds. Almost all fruits (and the avocado is a fruit) contain phenolic compounds, which turn brown when they react with oxygen.

If you want to prevent this—for instance, when you want to keep your bowl of guacamole green overnight the only real solution is to put the guacamole in an absolutely airtight container. A bowl with a plastic lid isn't enough; you need to lay a piece of plastic wrap directly on the guacamole. It's a myth that the avocado's pit prevents browning: only the guacamole touching the pit stays green, and that's because it's not touching air.

If you want to keep slices of avocadogreen temporarily, you can slow down the reaction of phenolic compounds



with vitamin C. Dip or soak the slices in lemon or orange juice. If those citrus flavors don't match your recipe, try using a vitamin C tablet dissolved in water. That isn't as strange as it might sound: the fruit preservative products you can buy in the store are nothing but vitamin C, which is also called ascorbic acid. Shirley O. Corriher teaches food science and cooking classes across the country. She is a contributing editor to Fine Cooking.

(Continued)

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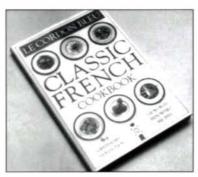
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Sauté garlic without scorching

Many recipes call for sautéing garlic in hot oil, but sometimes the garlic seems to turn into hard, bitter pellets. Why does this happen, and how can I prevent it?

—Edie Delohery, Overland Park, KS

Dean Dal Bozzo replies: If you're getting garlic pellets, you've burned your garlic, and there's no saving it. Throw it away, wash out the pan, and start over. Burnt garlic is one of the worst things you can do to a dish: the acrid flavor permeates everything, and all of garlic's good qualities are lost.

Garlic needs heat to release its flavor, but it doesn't take long to burn. That's why, if you're sautéing garlic, you should chop it fine. The more you chop, the more cut surfaces you create; that means more flavor is available to be released and less time is needed to bring it out. Large chunks are fine for simmering in tomato sauces, but they're wrong for hot oil. They would burn long before they gave up any flavor.

For best results, have all ingredients ready before you begin heating oil in the sauté pan. When the oil is hot (not smoking, which can burn the garlic almost immediately) add the garlic. Stirit in the oil for just a few seconds. As soon as you can smell garlic, add the next ingredient. This lowers the temperature of the oil and prevents the garlic from burning, but the garlic has now penetrated the oil

and can flavor your dish—without scorching.

Dean Dal Bozzo is vice president of The Stinking Rose, a garlic restaurant with locations in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Any difference in liquid and dry measuring cups?

When I mix hot cereal in the morning, the directions say to mix half a cup of cereal with one cup of water. I use a half-cup measure to dish out the dry cereal, then fill it twice for the water. Is this wrong? Should I be using a different "cup" to measure liquid?

> —George Schmidd, Ithaca, NY

Dawn Jump replies:
For the purposes of oatmeal, you can consider liquid and dry measures the same. But if you're cooking something that requires accurate measurement for success, you need to use both liquid and dry measuring cups.

For example, if you needed one cup of water, you would have to fill a dry measuring cup (the kind usually made of plastic or metal and kept in a

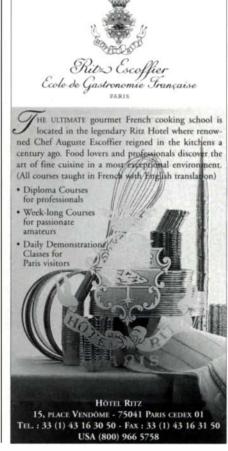


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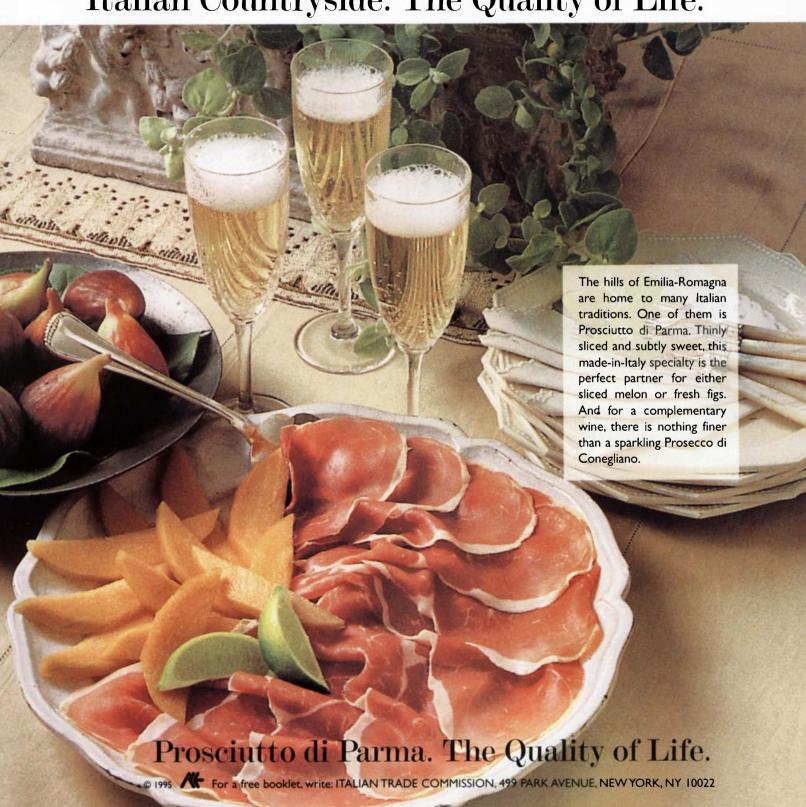
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kitchen drawer) to the very brim to get the right amount. Water doesn't respond well to that treatment—it tends to spill—so it would be easier to use a glass measuring cup for this purpose. Likewise, it's difficult to measure dry ingredients in a cup meant for liquids. It's hard to see if beans or sugar are really level, and it's impossible to level off flour. Dawn Jump is the public relations coordinator for Progressive International, a cookware and bakeware company in Seattle.

For the freshest ginger, buy it often

What's the best way to store fresh ginger?

—Chris Hull, Salt Lake City, UT

Jackie Shen replies: Ginger is at its best when it's very

fresh, so it's ideal to buy and use ginger in a matter of a few days. If you buy ginger this frequently, it requires no special storage other than keeping it in a dry spot, as you might store a bulb of fresh garlic. Young, perfectly firm ginger is always preferable, but if you must keep it, wrap it in aluminum foil or a paper towel, put it in a plastic bag (not tightly closed), and keep it in the refrigerator's crisper drawer.

Some people store ginger in sherry or rice wine, but I don't: this practice seems to have a



better effect on the wine than on the ginger.

Jackie Shen is the executive chef for Lawry's in Chicago.

Cooking custards without curdling

I made ice cream with a recipe that said to whisk a cup of the hot mixture (cream, milk, sugar) into six beaten eggs, and then stir the egg mixture back into the rest of the cooked mix. I ended up with stringy egg whites in my ice cream. What happened?

—Penny Golabek, Bakersville, NC

Stephen Durfee replies: The reason you had stringy egg whites in your ice cream is that your recipe mistakenly called for whole eggs instead of yolks.

The procedure you describe is called tempering. It's

a good way to mix hot liquids with egg yolks, which can curdle in excessive heat. When a small amount of hot liquid is mixed with egg yolks, the yolks' temperature rises but not enough to make them curdle. This warmer liquid has been "tempered" and can now be added in a slow, steady stream back into the hot liquid without curdling. Egg whites, however, set at a lower temperature than egg yolks. That's why the yolks blended with your ice cream while the whites curdled.

In any case, yolks add richness and body to ice cream, but egg whites generally have no place in ice cream unless you want to make a meringue topping.

Stephen Durfee is a sous-chef at The French Laundry in Yount-ville, California. ◆





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A great garlic peeler

this year's Garlic Festival in Gilroy, California, I came back with more than just garlic breath. The annual three-day extravaganza, attended by more than 100,000, pays tribute to the stinking rose with crafts, music, entertainment, gourmet food (garlic served in every way you can think of—and then some), and the Great Garlic Cook-Off, for which I was one of the judges.

Tucked amid all the garlicthemed goods—garlic flags, garlic-shaped hats, garlicflavored ice cream—was what may just be the best garlic peeler in the world. I liked it so much that I bought four of them—one for me and three to give to friends.

The peeler looks like a cannoli, but the only thing sweet about it is how well it works. You simply put a garlic clove in the rubberlike tube

and roll the tube on a hard surface, hence the peeler's name: the E-Z-Rol. When you hear a crinkling sound, you remove the clove, which is now completely peeled ("naked as a jaybird," to quote Ben Omessi, the peeler's inventor).

Because the peeler doesn't crush or bruise them, the cloves come out of the tube looking pristine, which is great for recipes that call for whole, peeled cloves. This came to mind while I was judging a dish at the festival called Teriyaki Garlic Cloves, which calls for cloves from 30 to 40 heads of garlic. The peeled cloves looked so lovely that I wondered whether the recipe's creator used the E-Z-Rol. If he didn't, he should have. The E-Z-Rol makes quick work of peeling cloves and keeps the sticky peel away from fingers, where it usually clings with the tenacity of flypaper. I peel whole A quick roll in a tube peels garlic.
The E-Z-Rol's rubber tube protects
your fingers from garlic odor, and the
whole process takes just seconds.

heads of garlic with the E-Z-Rol so I can use the cloves throughout the week.

The E-Z-Rol, made by Elan, a division of the Omessi Group, is dishwasher-safe, lists for \$7.95, and comes with a lifetime guarantee. It's available in some gourmet shops. For more information, call Ben Omessi at 818/831-0748, or write to the Omessi Group, 11710 Doral Ave., Northridge CA 91326.

Abigail Johnson Dodge is a food stylist and consultant based in Southport, Connecticut. She is also Fine Cooking's recipe

Food fiction on tape

As someone who likes to read, and to cook and eat, I thoroughly enjoyed "Food Fictions," a two-cassette, 95-minute collection put out by Selected Shorts. "Food Fictions" features short stories and poems with culinary themes written by Angela Carter, Roald Dahl, Nora

Ephron, M. F. K. Fisher, Roy Blount Jr., and Ogden Nash. Recorded live at Symphony Space in New York City, some of the pieces are funny, some poignant; some are read by actors, others by the authors themselves.

My favorite piece is the dramatization of Angela Carter's short story, "The Kitchen Child." Set in the 18th century, this raucous tale recounts the childhood of the cook's son and the below-the-stairs goings-on at a country estate where the owners show up only once every few years.

Another high point is the excerpt from Nora Ephron's book, Heartburn, read by the author herself in a deadpan delivery that succeeds better than the occasional overpunchiness of the professional actors. Here, Ephron describes her apprenticeship as a food writer and pokes fun at other, overly serious food writers, particularly at their insistence that cooking is creative. The whole point, she asserts, is that cooking is mindless. "What I love about cooking," reads Ephron, "is that after a hard day there's something comforting about the fact that if you melt butter, and add flour and the hot



hotos: Susan Kahn

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stock, it will get thick. It's a sure thing. It's a sure thing in a world where nothing is sure." The only problem I had with Ephron's recitation is that it ended too soon.

The cassettes cost \$16.95, plus \$3.50 for postage. To order, write to Shorts on Cassette, c/o Symphony Space, 2537 Broadway, New York, NY 10025, or call 212/864-1414. Lisa Ornest teaches English at Hunter College in New York City.

An affordable mandoline

A mandoline is the kind of tool you believe you can do without until you use one. Sure, you can painstakingly julienne vegetables with a knife or speedily slice them with a food



The Benriner slicer gets the job done at a fraction of the price of a steel mandoline.

processor. But a mandoline gives you the best of both: the control of the knife and the ease of the food processor.

I like traditional stainlesssteel mandolines; their gleaming bodies and blades are sturdy and seemingly indestructible. Unfortunately, they are also quite expensive: about \$150 and up. But a good mandoline doesn't have to be hard to find—or to afford. Mandolines with plastic bodies, which cost about \$30, can do most jobs as well as their more expensive cousins can.

I recently tested one such mandoline made by Benriner. Of all the inexpensive mandolines, I like Benriner's best. Its stainless-steel blade cuts nicely and is infinitely adjustable with a simple turn of a screw, and it comes with three different julienne blades. On my own mandoline of similar quality and price, I'm limited to only three nonadjustable blades for slicing and one for julienne.

I enjoyed using the Benriner to prepare pretty entrées and side dishes. I sliced long julienne cuts of carrots, egg-

plant, squash, and zucchini, which I sautéed and served in potato baskets made from the paper-thin potato slices easily made with the Benriner. A roasted sea bass wrapped in a crispy potato crust was also a breeze to make with the Benriner.

Some cooks may not like the fact that the Benriner slicer has no legs—meaning that it isn't automatically poised at an angle, but this didn't bother me. I would have preferred a smaller, less clunky finger guard, however.

Despite these minor complaints, I believe the Benriner mandoline is a great value. Look for it in department stores and kitchenware shops. Fran Rosenheim is the chef/owner of Le Petit Gourmet Cooking School in Wayland, Massachusetts.



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Perfectly mixed batter is spooned into prepared pans. The air bubbles incorporated into the batter will make the baked cake light and airy.

Baking a better butter cake

Creaming correctly is the key to a light, fine texture

BY SUSAN G. PURDY

hen most people think of cake, they call to mind a layer cake—the rich, buttery cake of birthday celebrations. Butter cake, with its golden color, fine grain, and tender crumb, makes a wonderful basic layer cake for any occasion. It can be dressed up for a party with chocolate icing or presented simply, filled with raspberry jam and dusted with confectioners' sugar. It's also easy to make once you've learned a few basic techniques.

USE DIFFERENT METHODS TO MIX EACH INGREDIENT

Butter cakes are generally leavened by a combination of gases released from baking powder or baking soda and air whipped into the batter. Air pockets in the batter make the cake light in texture. Success depends on the correct blending of ingredients: the careful creaming of butter and sugar as well as the gentle folding of egg whites (if added separately) to maintain maximum aeration.

For best results when creaming, begin with your ingredients at room temperature. When butter (or margarine or shortening) is mixed with granulated sugar, the rough edges of the sugar crystals actually poke tiny holes in the fat. These holes become air bubbles that will be surrounded by fat, sugar, egg protein, and liquid to give the cake its light texture. For

the bubbles to hold their shape, the fat must be solid but pliable (68° to 72°F). If the fat is too cold, the walls around the air bubbles will become brittle and break, releasing the air and causing the cake to collapse as it bakes. If the fat is too warm, it will melt and won't maintain the bubble structure.

If you cream with an electric mixer, use medium speed. Excessive speed or friction can damage the air bubbles and melt the butter, resulting in a loss of volume and a cake that's too dense. Cream the mixture until it lightens in color, increases somewhat in volume, and looks whipped or fluffy with some graininess from the sugar.

Careful mixing and whipped egg whites produce the lightest cake



1 Cream the sugar and butter on medium speed until the mixture is pale and light. If the butter becomes too soft, chill the mixture a few minutes.



2 Alternate adding wet and dry ingredients, ending with the dry ingredients. Add any flavorings at this stage.



3 Gently fold in whipped egg whites in several additions. Work carefully to blend the mixtures without deflating the delicate air bubbles.

Add liquids slowly to keep the batter from separating. Eggs add richness, color, and texture to butter cakes. They also help to bind the batter. You can add whole eggs to the creamed butter and sugar, or you can separate the eggs (as in the recipe that follows), adding the yolks to the creamed mixture and the whites, whipped stiff, as the final ingredient.

When adding whole eggs or egg yolks, add them one at a time and beat the batter after each addition. This suspends the eggs' fat in the butter-sugar mixture. If you add the yolks too quickly, the batter may separate because more liquid has been added than the emulsion can absorb at one time.

When adding the rest of the ingredients, alternate the dry ingredients (flour, baking powder, and salt) and the wet (milk or other liquid), beginning and ending with the flour mixture to better bind the batter.

To further lighten the cake's texture, add whipped egg whites. I like to whip the egg whites with some of the

sugar from the recipe and gently fold this meringue into the batter as the final step.

BAKE IN PREPARED PANS UNTIL GOLDEN

To keep the cake from sticking to the pan, it's important to grease the pan with a thin coating of butter or shortening. I also line the bottom of the pan with parchment or waxed paper and grease the paper as well. It's also important to dust the pans with flour: the cake needs something to cling to as it bakes so that it can rise fully. Be sure to tap out any excess flour.

When the cake is done, cool it on a raised rack to allow air to circulate around it, preventing moisture from condensing on the bottom of the cake. Because the cake's structure is still fragile, let the layers settle in their pans and rest for about 10 minutes. Then you can remove the layers from their pans, peel off the paper liners, and cool the layers on a wire rack. When the layers are completely cool, you can ice and assemble them.

Basic Butter Cake

This recipe, which dates back to the 19th century, is often called One-Two-Three Cake, referring to the quantities, in cups, of butter, sugar, and flour. *Yields* two 8- or 9-inch layers.

12¾ oz. (3 cups) sifted all-purpose flour; more for dusting the pans 1 Tbs. baking powder ½ tsp. salt

8 oz. (1 cup) unsalted butter, at room temperature

2 cups sugar

4 large eggs, separated, at room temperature

1 cup milk

1 tsp. vanilla extract

Heat the oven to 350°F. Prepare two cake pans (see text at left).

Sift together the flour, baking powder, and salt; set aside. In a large bowl, combine the butter and 1½ cups sugar. With an electric mixer, beat the mixture until it's light and smooth. Add the egg yolks one at a time, beating after each addition. Scrape down the bowl and the beaters.

With the mixer on its lowest speed, alternately add the flour mixture and the milk, beginning and ending with the flour. Beat in the vanilla extract.

In another bowl, with a cleaned beater, beat the egg whites on medium speed until just foamy. Gradually add the remaining ½ cup sugar and beat until the

whites begin to look satiny. Increase the speed and beat until the whites hold soft peaks and are smooth and satiny. Stir or whisk about 1 cup of the whipped whites into the batter and then fold in the remaining whites in several additions.

Divide the batter between the cake pans. Bake in the center of the oven until the top looks golden and is springy to the touch, and a wooden cake tester inserted in the center of the cake comes out clean, 30 to 35 min.

Cool the cakes in their pans on a wire rack for about 10 min. Remove from the pan, peel off the paper, and cool completely.

VARIATIONS:

- ◆ For an orange-flavored cake: Substitute orange juice for the milk. Add 1 tsp. orange extract and grated zest from 1 orange.
- ◆ For a coconut cake: Substitute coconut milk for the milk. Add ¾ tsp. coconut extract and 1 cup shredded sweetened coconut.
- ◆ For a spice cake: Add to the sifted flour 1 Tbs. sifted unsweetened cocoa, 1½ tsp. ground cinnamon, and ½ tsp. each nutmeg, allspice, ginger, and cloves.

Susan G. Purdy teaches pastry and dessert techniques across the country. Her cookbooks include A Piece of Cake and Have Your Cake ℰ Eat It. Too. ◆



4 Divide the batter between the pans. Spread the batter slightly from the center to the edges. This will keep the cake from rising unevenly.



5 Test the cake as it becomes golden and shrinks slightly from the pan; it should feel springy. A toothpick in the center should come out clean.



6 and then invert both. Lift off the pan, peel off the paper, and let the cake cool completely.

Do you have a clever way to peel vegetables, line a cake pan, or keep herbs tasting fresh? Write to Tips, Fine Cooking, PO Box 5506, Newtown, CT 06470-5506; or send your tip by e-mail. Fine Cooking's America Online address is finecookng; the CompuServe address is 74602,2651. We pay for tips

we publish.



Slit lemon wedges to avoid squirting.

Easy-squeeze lemon wedaes

Here's how to slice lemon wedges that won't squirt in vour eve when you squeeze them. Cut a lemon wedge, then make three or four small, vertical slits across the lemon's edge. These cuts prevent the juice from squirting out forcefully. When you squeeze the lemon wedge, the juice will run out gently.

> —Cynthia A. Jaworski, Chicago, IL

Pressure-cooked potato salads

When I'm preparing potato salads, I peel and cut the potatoes into their final shape and cook them in a pressure cooker. Not only is this faster, but it allows me to slice cool, firm potatoes instead of ones that threaten to lose their shape and burn my fingers.

> -Marianne Smith, Johnson City, TN

Orange juice refreshes canned tomatoes

A local restaurant chef taught me how to use canned plum tomatoes to make the best "fresh" plum tomatoes for

pizza. Doctor the canned tomatoes by slicing them once or twice and soaking them overnight in orange juice. When I'm ready to bake the pizza, I drain and chop the soaked tomatoes, put them on the dough, and sprinkle on cheeses and spices. I've used plum tomatoes from my garden, but they just don't taste as good as these.

> –Phillip Zook, Carrboro, NC

Icing a cake, without crumbs

I have an icing technique that ensures a smooth, crumbless top coat. I spread a layer of icing on the top and sides of the cake and then scrape it off, creating a "crumb layer." I can see mostly cake under the icing, but the crumbs are either scraped off or sealed in and are no longer a nuisance when I apply the final layer of icing. The crumb layer also fills any gaps in the cake. Make sure you put icing for the crumb layer in a separate bowl; this prevents transferring crumbs to the finished layer. I've also found that if the cake is refrigerated for at least half an hour (preferably

overnight) before frosting, it becomes even more crumbresistant. Buttercream icing doesn't pull as much on a cold cake.

> -Krista Stanley, Mt. Kisco, NY

Salt prevents oven fires

If ingredients bubble over onto the oven floor when baking, you can stop them from smoking by tossing salt on the mess. When baking is finished, immediately scrape up the spill with a spatula.

> -Mary R. Sullivan, Concord, CA

Bananas that won't turn brown

To prevent sliced bananas from turning brown, dip them in a little white wine before arranging them on tarts or using them in fruit salad. The acid in the wine prevents the fruit from oxidizing, but it doesn't affect the flavor.

> -B. Bader. Hartsdale, NY

A heat shield for pie crusts



Pie tin prevents browning.

To prevent pie crust from browning too much, cut out the center of a disposable aluminumpie tin and save the resulting ring. Lay this aluminum ring on top of your crust during cooking if the edges are becoming too brown.

—Richard Simon, Lawrence, NY

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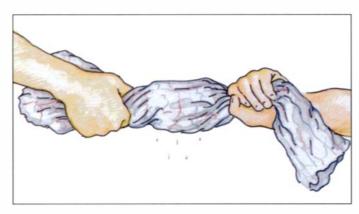
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Twist shredded vegetables in a towel to dry them.

Squeezing moisture from shredded vegetables

I have a tip for making potato pancakes or any other recipe that requires squeezing out excess liquid from grated vegetables. Spread the shredded vegetables on a clean dishtowel, roll up the towel lengthwise, and squeeze out the liquid by twisting the ends of the towel.

> -Michele Cook. Triuggio, Italy

A reusable oil dispenser

I've found the perfect oil dispenser for my collection of cooking oils—an empty Worcestershire bottle. Its shape and size are perfect, and there is no risk of oil dripping down the sides.

Of course, the bottle must be washed thoroughly before it can be used. If you don't have a dishwasher, mix about 2 tablespoons of dishwashing soap with about 2 cups of water, remove and soak the dripless cap, and fill the bottle with soapy water. After about 20 minutes, rinse out the bottle and the cap. When the bottle is completely dry, it's ready to use.

> —Linda McBrearty. Portland, OR

Another use for cast-iron skillets

If you're making a delicate sauce and you don't have a heavy pan or a heat tamer, use a cast-iron skillet to buffer

the pan from the heat. Over gentle heat, any saucepan set inside a cast-iron skillet is transformed into a piece of heavy-duty equipment.

> —G. R. Scialoia, Mt. Snow, VT

A marinade injection lets poultry baste itself

To tenderize and add flavor to poultry, inject marinades into the flesh before roasting or smoking. Injection kits are available in cookingsupply stores. My standard injected marinade is a strained mixture of butter or oil, wine, apple juice, garlic powder, ground white pepper (it's finer than black pepper), and salt. I inject the marinade a few times on each side of the bird and let



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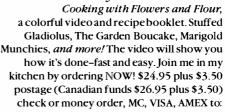


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it sit for a while before roasting. Injected poultry seems to baste itself from the inside, so I don't need to baste the poultry during roasting. The meat is flavorful and juicy throughout.

> –Gary Turzilli, New York, NY

Use a microwave for speedy pizza dough

To make pizza dough rise faster, put the dough and a glass of water in the microwave and run it at 10% power for 3 minutes. Let the dough rest as long as 10 minutes and repeat. This rising technique works for any yeast dough that does not need the subtle flavors that come from a long, slow rise.

> -Kathy Garrison, Lafayette, CO

Keeping seafood fresh at home



Easy way to ice down seafood.

I've come up with a simple way to keep seafood fresh for several days by using a large stockpot with a steamer insert. Put the seafood in the insert. cover it with ice, and set the steamer in the stockpot before storing it in the refrigerator. Replace the ice as necessary. This ensures that the seafood is both thoroughly chilled and well drained.

> -Iohn L. Wilson, Houston, TX

Soften brown sugar

When I need to soften brown sugar in a hurry, I just zap it box and all—in the microwave. In a few seconds, I have brown sugar that's warm, soft, and ready to use.

-Doris I. Davlin. Pauma Valley, CA

Deep-frying to season a wok

I season my wok by using it to deep-fry. It's an ideal frying tool; a wok gives me the depth I need without the threat of oil bubbling over. And after

just one batch of French fries, I discovered that I also had a very well-seasoned wok.

-Robert Ponsi, Eustis, FL

Salt also prevents sticky garlic

When chopping fresh garlic, add a little salt: this prevents it from sticking to the knife.

> —Rene A. Iacobus. Dayton, OH

Quickly thicken pasta sauce

Italian friends taught me that if your tomato sauce turns out thinner than you'd like, try adding a tablespoon or two of dry breadcrumbs. They give body and substance by absorbing some of the sauce, without changing the flavor.

> —Russ Shumaker, Richmond, VA

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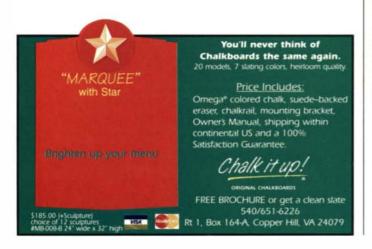
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Spiced nuts are hard to resist.These pecans and almonds have a sweet and savory coating.

BY DIANE ROSSEN WORTHINGTON

ooking a holiday dinner often comes with a lot of emotional baggage. Everyone has a different idea about the right thing to serve: "It's got to be goose with chestnut stuffing" or "My mother always made roast beef."

I don't want to get caught in that tangle of traditions any more than I want to spend my whole holiday chopping and peeling. So, I've started a new tradition: brunch. I look forward to family and friends arriving in

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The Holiday Brunch

A brunch makes holiday entertaining easy. It's a casual meal, and many dishes can be served at room temperature.

the late morning and relaxing with a glass of sparkling wine. The kids come in the kitchen to sneak a bit of coffee cake, and I distract them by asking for help whisking the eggs. In short, it's fun. And by preparing ahead of time, I have as much fun as my guests.

MAKE THE MENU WORK FOR YOU

If want to enjoy yourself when you entertain, choose a menu that holds up under delay. You don't want to miss gift-giving because you're watching over a soufflé. Easy breakfasts like scrambled eggs and pancakes are popular, but they're not very festive and are only at their peak when served immediately. Instead, choose dishes that have a variety of flavors and textures, yet won't be diminished by a few minutes in limbo.

Here is the menu that has become my holiday standard; it generously serves eight to ten people. You can prepare much of it in advance, and it takes well to adaptation and inspiration.

A CHAMPAGNE COCKTAIL SUITS THE OCCASION

The flavors of cranberries and oranges seem like a natural combination during the holiday season. If you pair them with a dry sparkling wine, the fruit flavors stand out, and the drink doesn't become too sweet. This drink is also great for the kids; just substitute ginger ale or seltzer for the sparkling wine.

Champagne flute glasses work best because the smaller surface area leaves less room for the bubbles to dissipate. Be sure to pour the juice in the glass first and then top with sparkling wine to prevent overflow.

SPICED NUTS TO MAKE AHEAD, THEN HIDE

A spiced citrus sugar paste coats the nuts before roasting. Citrus zest, coriander, mace, cinnamon, and cayenne create an intriguing and slightly exotic

Holiday brunch countdown

Organization is key to enjoyable entertaining, whether it means polishing the silver or putting sparkling wine in the refrigerator the night before. The more that can be done ahead of time, the happier you'll be the day of the brunch.

ONE MONTH AHEAD

- ◆ Make complete menu and invite guests. Holiday calendars fill up fast.
- ◆ Make two shopping lists: one for staples you can buy a week ahead, and another for items that must be purchased only a day or two before the brunch.
- ◆ Decide what type of tabletop items you'll use. If you want paper items with a holiday theme, buy early; they go quickly. If you want to use special-occasion china, silver, and linen, make sure they're in good shape.

ONE WEEK AHEAD

- ◆ Shop for staple items.
- ◆ Make the nuts; store them in an airtight container.

TWO DAYS AHEAD

- Shop for perishables and other last-minute items.
- ◆ If you're serving coffee, buy fresh beans.
- Bring out all serving pieces.
- ◆ Make extra ice for drinks.

ONE DAY AHEAD

- ◆ For the frittata—Prepare the filling. Measure out all other ingredients (except the eggs) and keep refrigerated.
- ◆ For the coffee cake—Prepare the streusel topping, cover, and refrigerate. Measure out dry ingredients, cover, and keep at room temperature.
- ◆ For the cocktail—Mix the juices in a pitcher and refrigerate. Chill the sparkling wine.
- Set the table.

THE DAY OF THE BRUNCH

- ◆ Make the coffee cake first thing in the morning.
- ◆ Put the nuts in serving dishes.
- ◆ Prepare the prosciutto-wrapped pears.
- Make the frittata.
- Pour yourself the first champagne cocktail and relax.



Everyone loves coffee cake. Fresh apple chunks make this cake special.



Cranberry and orange juice make a rosy champagne cocktail. You can substitute seltzer for the kids.

flavor combination. You can make the nuts a week ahead and keep them in an airtight container, although you'll have a hard time not eating them.

When you make the sugar mixture for the nuts, watch the heat—it's a short step between caramelizing and burning. I toast the nuts at a low temperature because the glaze needs time to stick to the nuts without the risk of burning.

THE FRITTATA: A "FLAT OMELET" WITH PATIENCE

A frittata is an infinitely flexible breakfast dish. It's easier (and I think prettier) than an omelet, but the ingredients are the same. Basically, it's an omelet you start on the stove and finish in the oven. Instead of folding the egg mixture in the pan, you finish it by letting it become brown and puffy in the oven. The Italians invented the frittata and originally intended it to be served at room temperature. While I like serving frittatas still warm and puffed from the oven, they taste great at almost any temperature.

30 FINE COOKING

A new way to serve potatoes and eggs. A frittata can be as simple as adding fresh herbs and cheese to beaten eggs. My recipe uses sautéed potatoes, cheese, and fresh herbs, but you also could include other sautéed vegetables, or cooked and sliced sausages.

When you use potatoes as a frittata filling, it has the effect of combining two breakfast dishes into one delicious result. I like to use new potatoes in this dish for their tender texture and sweet flavor. I sauté them with onions and thyme until they're crispy on the outside and tender inside. This gives the frittata a nice variety of textures.

If time is of the essence, cook the potatoes the night before the brunch. You'll have one less thing to worry about and one more ingredient at hand.

Cooking the frittata. When I make a frittata, I use a nonstick pan with an ovenproof handle. If your pan's handle isn't ovenproof, wrap it with a thick layer of aluminum foil.

Once the eggs and the filling are in the pan, there's not much else to do. Occasionally, you need to give the eggs a gentle stir with a spatula to make sure they're cooking evenly. Keep an eye on the frittata; the second the eggs appear to have set, transfer the pan to the heated oven. The hot oven browns the top of the frittata beautifully and puffs it up. You can serve the frittata straight from the pan or slide it onto a serving platter (see photos at right).

A SIDE DISH THAT'S SWEET, PEPPERY, AND SIMPLE

Lay a sprig of peppery arugula on a piece of prosciutto, top it with a pear slice, wrap it up, and it's done. This unusual melding of sweet and savory is as easy as it is delicious.

Red Anjou pears are pretty, but Comice are also very good. Use imported Italian prosciutto if you can find it; try Columbo (from Canada) or San Pietro (from Switzerland) if you can't. If you can taste before you buy, go for a flavor that's gently sweet with just a touch of salt. I also prefer pieces that come from the center of the prosciutto; they have less fat and a more even shape.

RELAX WITH A SLICE OF CAKE WHILE SOMEONE ELSE CLEANS UP

The tender buttermilk coffee cake is a finale that pleases everyone. It's flavored with ginger, studded with apples, and swirled with a buttery streusel so everyone gets some streusel in his or her slice. If you'd like to vary it, try using pears instead of apples. The cake even tastes terrific without the fruit.

Now that brunch is over, you only have one more thing to do: nothing. After a meal like this, your guests will be happy to do the dishes.

Champagne Cocktail

The orange and cranberry juices combine to create a beautiful deep blush color. *Yields 16 drinks*.

2 cups fresh orange juice, chilled 2 cups cranberry juice cocktail, chilled 1 bottle brut sparkling wine, chilled

Combine the orange juice and cranberry juice cocktail in a pitcher. Pour ½ cup of this mixture in each champagne flute. Slowly pour in the sparkling wine, making sure it doesn't overflow. Serve immediately.

Spiced Nuts

Don't increase the heat or the nuts may bum. Yields 4 cups.

3 Tbs. unsalted butter
1 Tbs. finely chopped orange zest
2 tsp. finely chopped lemon zest
2 tsp. ground cinnamon
1½ tsp. ground coriander
1¼ tsp. ground mace
¼ tsp. cayenne
2 Tbs. plus 2 tsp. brown sugar
¼ tsp. salt
½ lb. (about ½ cups) pecan halves
½ lb. (about 1½ cups) blanched almonds

Heat the oven to 300°F. In a large saucepan, melt the butter over medium-low heat. Add the orange and lemon zests, cinnamon, coriander, mace, cayenne, brown sugar, and salt. Combine until the mixture is bubbly and well blended. Add the nuts and stir to coat them evenly. Transfer the nut mixture to a baking sheet, spread it evenly, and bake for 25 min., stirring every 5 to 7 min. For crispier nuts, increase the cooking time to 35 to 40 min.

Potato Frittata

When they're in season, you can substitute sliced fresh tomatoes for the sun-dried. Serves eight.

1 Tbs. unsalted butter 1 Tbs. olive oil 1 Ib. potatoes, peeled and diced in ½-inch cubes

1 large red onion, chopped

2 tsp. chopped fresh thyme leaves ³/₄ tsp. salt

1/4 tsp. freshly ground black pepper

(Ingredient list continues)





To get the frittata out of the pan, carefully run a flat wooden spatula around the edge.



Set a serving plate under the pan. Use the spatula to support the frittata as you tip the pan and pull it away.

Slice and serve the frittata at the table. In the unlikely event that you have left-overs, gently warmed frittata makes a great midnight snack.



Fresh pears and prosciutto make a sweet and salty package. The arugula adds a pretty and peppery accent.

12 large eggs
2 Tbs. chopped parsley
3 oz. Gruyère or other mild cheese, shredded (about 1½ cups)
6 sun-dried tomatoes packed in oil, drained, and sliced in half lengthwise

Heat the oven to 350°F. Heat the butter and oil in a 9- or 10-inch nonstick skillet with an ovenproof handle (or cover a wooden or plastic handle with a thick layer of foil) over medium heat. Add the potatoes and onion and sauté for 20 to 25 min., stirring frequently, until the onions are softened and the potatoes are crispy on the surface and tender inside. Season with the thyme, ½ tsp. salt, and a pinch of pepper. Set aside. (You can make the filling up to

this point a day in advance and refrigerate it.
Bring it to room temperature before continuing.)

Combine the eggs, parsley, and the remaining salt and pepper in a medium mixing bowl; whisk until well blended. Stir in 1½ cups of the Gruyère.

Flatten the potato filling in the skillet with a spatula and pour the egg mixture over. Cook over medium-low heat, occasionally stirring gently, until the bottom is lightly set and cooked, about 7 min. Arrange the tomatoes around the edge of the frittata. Sprinkle with the remaining ¼ cup cheese. Put the skillet in the oven. Bake until the frittata is puffed and brown, about

12 min. Serve hot, warm, or at room temperature.

To enjoy entertaining, choose a menu that holds up under delay.

Pears & Arugula Wrapped in Prosciutto

These look beautiful when presented together on a plate, spoke-fashion. *Yields 12 pieces*.

12 thin slices of prosciutto (about ½ lb.) 12 leaves arugula, thick stem removed; more for garnish 2 Anjou or Comice pears, cored and cut into 6 wedges each

Lay a piece of prosciutto on a flat surface and put an arugula leaf down the center. Put a pear wedge in the

center of the arugula. Drape each end of the prosciutto over the pear. Arrange the pears, sticking outward, on a platter in a circular pattern, with arugula or fresh herbs in the center, if you like. This may be made 2 hours ahead, covered with plastic wrap, and refrigerated.

Apple-Ginger Streusel Coffee Cake

This addictive coffee cake looks pretty when prepared in a bundt pan, but a 9x13-inch pan also works. Serves eight.

FOR THE STREUSEL:

1/3 packed cup brown sugar

3/4 tsp. ground ginger

1/4 tsp. ground cinnamon

3 Tbs. all-purpose flour

1/4 cup unsalted butter

1/3 cup finely chopped walnuts

FOR THE CAKE:

10¹/4 oz. (2¹/4 cups) all-purpose flour
¹/₂ tsp. ground ginger
Pinch ground nutmeg
1 tsp. baking powder
1 tsp. baking soda
¹/₂ tsp. salt
¹/₄ cup finely chopped crystallized ginger
3/₄ cup firmly packed dark brown sugar
¹/₂ cup sugar

22 tsp. vanilla extract
3 large eggs
1½ cups buttermilk
1 medium Granny Smith or Golden Delicious apple,
cored and chopped coarse
Confectioners' sugar for dusting

Heat the oven to 350°F. Butter and flour a 10-cup bundt pan and set aside.

For the streusel—Blend the brown sugar, ginger, cinnamon, flour, and butter with your fingers or a pastry blender until the mixture resembles large breadcrumbs. Mix in the walnuts and refrigerate until ready to use.

For the cake—Sift together the flour, ground ginger, nutmeg, baking powder, baking soda, and salt into a large bowl. Stir in the crystallized ginger and set aside. In a large mixing bowl, beat the butter with an electric mixer until light and fluffy. Gradually add the sugars, continuing to beat until very light. Add the vanilla and then the eggs one at a time, beating each one in well before adding the next. Alternately stir in the flour and the buttermilk, until the batter is just mixed. Don't overbeat or your cake will be tough. Gently stir in the chopped apple.

Pour half the batter into the prepared pan. Sprinkle with a third of the streusel. Pour in the remaining batter and top with the remaining streusel. The streusel will sink a little during baking to make a swirl.

Bake until the top of the cake is firm (a skewer inserted in the center should come out clean), about 40 to 45 min. Cool for 15 min. in the pan on a wire rack. Invert the cake onto a serving platter, dust with confectioners' sugar, and serve slightly warm or at room temperature.

Diane Rossen Worthington is a cookbook author and radio talk-show host in Sherman Oaks, California. Her program, "California Foods," won the James Beard Award for Best Culinary Radio Show for two consecutive years.

Ship-Shape Christmas Cookies

These baking, storing, and shipping tips guarantee great-looking, great-tasting holiday gifts

TEXT BY JOANNE MCALLISTER SMART RECIPES BY MARGERY K. FRIEDMAN

very year after his office holiday party, my father would bring home a box of Christmas cookies made by his secretary, Jean. Though the cookies looked different—some were dark, some light, some dipped in chocolate, others filled with jam—they all tasted alike, their distinct characteristics lost in a mingling of flavors. Jean's mistake wasn't that she didn't know how to bake cookies, but that she didn't know how to pack them so that they would taste their best.

Like Jean, you might make cookies to send to friends and family or to hand deliver as hostess gifts. If you do, review the following baking and packing tips before you begin. They'll not only help you bake great-looking, great-tasting cookies, but they'll also ensure that what arrives resembles what you've sent.

Therecipes beginning on p. 34 have many ingredients in common, which will help keep your cookie-baking session running smoothly. Yet the cookies' flavors—rich butter, zingy ginger, and delicate lime—

are deliciously different. Just be sure to pack them so they stay that way.

CONTROLLING SHAPE AND COLOR WITH THE RIGHT PAN AND INGREDIENTS

Problems with shape and color usually happen during baking, but there are ways to prevent such problems before the first batch is baked.

The pan and its position in the oven affect color. Bake cookies on a flat, aluminum baking sheet; high sides deflect heat, making the cookies

Practical yet pretty packing—wrap each kind of cookie separately to keep flavors distinct. bake unevenly. For most even coloring, bake one sheet at a time. If that isn't practical, stagger two sheets on two oven racks and switch their positions halfway through baking.

Don't let the cookies spread and "kiss." Give your cookies plenty of room on the baking sheet so they can spread without touching. To keep cookies from spreading too much, don't drop the dough onto a hot baking sheet, and don't grease the baking sheet unless a recipe specifically calls for it. If your cookies persist in spreading, try replacing some of the butter with shortening, which doesn't melt as quickly. You can also switch to a high-protein flour, which inclined to spread.

sleeves, and then surround the sleeves in bubble wrap for best cushioning.

Don't mix soft and crisp cookies in the same package; the crisp cookies absorb moisture from the soft cookies and become soft themselves.

Use tins, not boxes, to ship cookies. Don't overstuff your tin with cookies. Fill empty spaces with plastic wrap or with holiday tissue or wrapping paper. Though it may sound like overkill, put the tin in a box and pad it with crumpled newspaper or wrapping paper. Finally, try to ship by two-day delivery, so the cookies arrive fresh.

> you've reached the right consistency. Chill the dough for at least an hour before rolling and shaping.

Heat the oven to 350°F. Divide the dough in half. Roll each piece between sheets of waxed paper to about 1/4 inch thick. Lightly dust the dough with flour. If the dough becomes sticky, chill it for about 10 min. Press the dough with cookie cutters. (If mailing, keep the shapes simple.) Reroll the scraps and cut more shapes. Repeat the process with the second half of the dough.

Bake the cookies until they turn light brown, 10 to 12 min. Remove from the baking sheet immediately and cool on a wire rack. When completely cooled, decorate with royal icing (recipe opposite) or other decorations, if desired.

For sandwich cookies—Make the dough as directed but roll it to about 1/8 inch thick. Press cookies with a 2-inch circular cutter. Using a smaller cookie cutter of the same or a different shape, cut holes in half of the 2-inch circles. (Use scraps from the holes to make a few more cookies.) Bake as directed above. When the cookies are cool, spread about 1 tsp. ganache (recipe opposite) or fruit preserves on one side of a whole cookie. Press on a cookie with a cut-out center. Repeat with the rest of the cookies. Yields about 30 sandwich cookies.

For bar cookies—Shape dough into a brick about 3 inches wide, 9½ inches long, and 1¼ inches thick. Chill the dough for at least an hour. Cut the brick into

Basic Butter Cookie Dough

This dough works great for a marathon cookiebaking session because it allows for variations of shape and flavor. Yields about 6 dozen 2-inch cookies.

8 oz. (16 Tbs.) unsalted butter, softened 41/2 oz. (1 cup) confectioners' sugar, sifted after measuring 1 tsp. vanilla extract

1/4 tsp. almond extract 101/2 oz. (21/3 cups) all-purpose flour

Cream the butter and sugar together with a mixer or a wooden spoon until well blended. Add the vanilla and almond extracts. Sift the flour with the salt; gradually add the flour to the butter mixture until you

have a firm but silky dough that does not stick to your hands. If necessary, add more flour a little at a time until





¼-inch slices. Bake in a 350°F oven until golden brown, about 12 to 15 min. Yields about 40 cookies.

VARIATIONS ON THE BASIC BUTTER COOKIE DOUGH:

- For a nutty flavor, omit the almond extract and add 1 cup of toasted chopped hazelnuts to the dough.
- ◆ For a cardamom-flavored cookie, omit the almond extract and add ½ tsp. ground cardamom to the dough. This tastes great paired with orange marmalade in a cookie sandwich (as described at left).

Ganache

Yields 1 cup, enough for 30 two-inch sandwich cookies.

½ cup heavy cream 6 oz. bittersweet chocolate, chopped fine (1 cup)

Bring the cream to a full boil, transfer it to a bowl, and cool for a minute. Pour the chocolate onto the hot cream and mix with a rubber spatula until the chocolate is melted. The ganache will thicken to a spreading consistency as it cools.

Royal Icing

Because it becomes quite stiff, this icing works well on cookies that are to be shipped. *Yields V2 cup*.

1 large egg white 1/4 tsp. cream of tartar

4½ oz. (1 cup) confectioners' sugar, sifted after measuring

Beat the egg white until frothy. Add the cream of tartar and the confectioners' sugar, a little at a time, beating until the mixture forms soft peaks. The icing dries quickly, so keep it covered with a wet cloth until ready to use; it will hold about 12 hours covered this way. Pipe the icing on the cookies using various small pastry tubes. For a coffee-flavored variation, add ½ tsp. instant espresso.

Triple-Ginger Cookies

Ginger in three forms adds a warm zing to this variation on the traditional spice cookie. *Yields about 4½ dozen cookies.*

5½ oz. (11 Tbs.) unsalted butter, softened 1 cup molasses ¾ cup sugar 1 egg 1 tsp. vanilla extract 18 oz. (4 cups) all-pur pose flour 1 tsp. baking soda ½ tsp. salt 1 tsp. ground ginger 2 Tbs. finely chopped crystallized ginger

2 Tbs. finely chopped fresh ginger Confectioners' sugar for dusting (optional) All these cookies can be frozen. Wrap them well and freeze them while they're still fresh but not hot from the oven. Ice the cookies after defrosting.

Cream the butter and molasses with a mixer or a wooden spoon until well blended. Add the sugar and mix until well blended. Add the egg and vanilla extract and beat until well incorporated. Sift together the flour, baking soda, and salt. Mix the ground, crystallized, and fresh ginger into the dry ingredients. Stir the dry mixture into the butter mixture in three batches until just blended.

Heat the oven to 350°F. Roll the dough in 1 Tbs. chunks into 1-inch balls. Arrange the balls 1 inch apart on ungreased baking sheets. Bake until the cookies crack slightly on top but are still moist inside, about 13 min. Cool on racks; sprinkle with confectioners' sugar.

Lime Zest Wafers

These somewhat delicate cookies hold up well during travel due to their uniform size: just pack them in a sleeve and surround that with bubble wrap. *Yields about 100 cookies*.

8 oz. (16 Tbs.) unsalted butter, softened 1 cup sugar ½ tsp. vanilla extract 4 egg whites at room temperature 4½ oz. (1 cup) all-purpose flour, sifted after measuring ¼ tsp. salt

1 tsp. finely grated lime zest

Cream the butter and sugar with a mixer or a wooden spoon until well blended. Add the vanilla extract. Mix in the egg whites just until incorporated. Gradually add the flour and salt and mix just until absorbed. Stir in the lime zest.

Heat the oven to 350°F. Spray baking sheets with vegetable spray or lightly brush them with vegetable oil. Use a ½ tsp. measure to drop the batter onto the baking sheets. Leave a few inches between cookies because they spread. Bake until the edges are lightly browned, about 10 min. Remove the cookies immediately from the baking sheet and cool on a rack. (If the wafers become brittle before you have removed them from the baking sheet, slide the sheet into the oven for 30 seconds to soften them.)

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Classic Roast Beef and Yorkshire Pudding

Searing and slow roasting create crisply crusted, succulent beef

BY ANNE WILLAN

here is at least one good dish that has come out of England, and that's roast beef. Roast beef at my mother's house in England remains a celebration, the centerpiece of the family Sunday lunch or a winter dinner for friends. My home was in Yorkshire, the region famous for the best accompaniment to roast beef, Yorkshire pudding. The crisp cup of batter pudding filled with gravy was always at least as good as the meat itself. Other side dishes always included crisp potatoes, roasted until golden in drippings from the meat, and horseradish sauce made from the freshly grated root stirred into whipped cream.

When I moved to the United States, I was delighted to find the beef here is as good as that from England. By buying the best meat available, roasting it carefully, and adding the traditional accompaniments, beef becomes a feast.

CARVING A RIB ROAST



1 Steady the roast with a large fork; slice with a long, sharp knife. Cut along the rib bones to remove them completely. (Serve them along with the slices of meat.)



After removing the bones, set the meat cut side down and cut vertical slices for a four- to seven-rib roast (pictured here). For a smaller roast, turn the meat on its side and slice horizontally.

Photos except where noted: Brian Hagiwa



Let the roast beef rest before serving to allow the juices to be redistributed.



Make the roast beef extra special by starting with meat that's been aged for flavor, says author Anne Willan.

SPLURGE ON A GREAT PIECE OF MEAT

My mother prefers sirloin roast, not to be confused with sirloin steak, for roasting. Cut from the loin, it comprises the shell as well as the tenderloin divided by a T-shaped bone. Common in England, the cut is hard to find in the United States, although I have seen it. A rib roast, which is also cut from the loin, makes a wonderful roast as well and is widely available here. Other cuts suitable for roasting include top round, rump, and the outsized steamship round, but they are tougher than rib roast and so need to be cooked carefully and sliced thin.

Keep the bones in for maximum flavor. A boneless roast may be easier to carve, but I find the bones add flavor and keep the meat moist. Cutting out bones also severs the muscle fibers, so valuable juices can escape during cooking. When buying a bone-in roast, allow at least ¾ pound per person; for a boneless roast, allow ½ pound per person. I almost always buy a larger roast not only because the small ones tend to shrink, but also because leftover roast beef makes wonderful sandwiches the next day.

When buying your roast, eye the meat and check its label. Only a small percentage of meat is stamped prime, the highest grade, and much of that

is sold directly to restaurants. Prime (if you can find it) or choice, the next grade, are well worth the cost.

For a real treat, go to a specialty butcher who stocks beef that has been aged for flavor for two weeks or more on the carcass. During aging, enzymes begin to break down the meat's fibers, making it more tender. My mother still looks for the dryish cut surface that indicates well-aged beef, though nowadays almost all meat looks moist from having been frozen or stored in plastic cryovac bags.

Look for beef that's well marbled, meaning that it has heavy streaks of internal fat. This fat helps baste the meat while it cooks, keeping it moist and adding to its flavor. The roast should be trimmed of the bluish sinews and excess fat, but be sure you're left with a thin layer of surface fat to keep the roast moist.

Once you've selected your roast, store it in the refrigerator for up to three days before cooking it. If you've had to buy a frozen roast, thaw it in the refrigerator four to six hours per pound before roasting.

PREPARE THE ROAST AND PICK THE RIGHT PAN

The beef needs only a little preparation before it's ready to roast. For a boneless cut, truss it into a

Savory side dishes for roast beef

Accompaniments to authentic British roast beef never vary: Yorkshire pudding, roast potatoes, and horseradish sauce or hot mustard, or both.

Yorkshire pudding resembles a popover that has been richly irrigated with drippings from the roast. It is traditionally served before the meal to cut the appetite, but many families enjoy it with the roast (see recipe at right).

Potatoes are another integral part of the meal, and they should be roasted in some of the drippings from the roast beef. To make the potatoes extra crispy, parboil peeled potatoes and roughen them with a fork before roasting.

Horseradish sauce adds piquancy to the plate. To make an English horseradish sauce, grate a heaping tablespoon of fresh horseradish root. Whisk a



Crisp, savory Yorkshire pudding has the best texture when made in large muffin tins.

scant cup of heavy cream until it holds soft peaks, and then stir in the horseradish, salt, pepper, and the juice of half a lemon. If you substitute bottled horseradish, use about 3 tablespoons.

Yorkshire Pudding

For a crisper pudding, replace ½ cup of the milk with water. *Yields 12 puddings*.

1 cup flour ½ tsp. salt Freshly ground black pepper 2 eggs

1½ to 1¾ cups milk
3 to 4 Tbs. drippings from the roasting pan (supplement the drippings with vegetable oil or lard if necessary)

Put the flour, salt, and pepper to taste in a large bowl and make a well in the center. Add the eggs and about a quarter of the milk to the well and whisk until mixed. Stir in the flour from the sides of the well until you have a smooth, stiff batter. Stir in half of the remaining milk. Cover the batter and let it stand at room temperature for about ½ hour.

Using a bulb baster or a spoon, pour 1 to 2 tsp. of the drippings

into each cup of 12 large (1-cup size) muffin tins. Put the tins in the oven on a rack above the roast beef. Meanwhile, stir enough of the remaining milk into the batter to make it the consistency of heavy cream.

When the drippings in the muffin tins are very hot, pour the batter into the tins, filling them about one-third full; the batter should sizzle in the hot fat. Return the tins to the oven and bake. The puddings are done when puffed, browned, and crisp, 25 to 30 min. They are best served hot out of the oven, but they can be kept warm in a low oven for about 15 min.

compact shape by tying loops around it with twine; bone-in roasts need no trussing. If there is much exposed lean muscle, you may want to wrap a layer of fat (called barding fat and available from some butchers) around the roast and secure it with string. Some British cooks dry marinate their beef with a mixture of dry mustard, sugar, and Dijon mustard. The roast is then refrigerated for at least two hours to allow the flavors to penetrate. Salt the roast only just before putting it in the oven; otherwise, the salt will draw out the juices too early, making a wet surface that would prevent proper browning.

The size of the pan should suit the roast so that the meat neither stews in too small a pan, nor dries and shrinks in one too large. The pan should have a heavy bottom and sides about two inches high, which retain the meat's drippings but don't shield the meat from the dry heat of the oven.

Some people use a rack to keep the meat from scorching on the pan's hot surface, but I find the rib bones act as a natural rack. Always keep the fat side up; as the fat renders, it also helps to baste the meat. To keep the meat moist, I baste it often.

SEARING CREATES A CRUST TO SEAL IN JUICES

My mother likes to roast her beef in a moderate oven, allowing the heat to penetrate slowly—a method that works especially well for cheaper cuts that toughen in high heat. When I cook a premium roast, however, I favor searing the meat for about 15 minutes in a 450°F oven to form a crisp crust that seals the juices into the meat. (Some food scientists

say the seal is a fallacy, but they haven't cooked as many roasts as I have.) I then lower the temperature to 350° for the rest of the cooking time.

Once in the oven, a roast is like a baby—it cannot be left alone. Baste the roast with its drippings every 10 to 15 minutes. To tell when her roast is ready, my mother eyeballs it and gives it a poke. I am somewhat less instinctive. I stick a metal skewer into the center of the meat, where it cooks the slowest. After 30 seconds, I pull out the skewer and touch it to my wrist. If the skewer is cold, the meat is undercooked; if warm, it is rare; if hot, it is well done. The most reliable way to test if meat is done is to use a meat thermometer (see times and temperatures in the recipe).

The roast will continue to cook from its own heat when you take it from the oven, so allow for the internal temperature rising by a few degrees. The meat should rest for about 15 minutes on a cutting board before serving to allow the juices to be reabsorbed and to firm up the meat. While the meat is resting, make the gravy using the delicious caramelized juices that have stuck to the bottom of the roasting pan.

A traditional platter presentation of roast beef is part of the festivities. Like the Thanksgiving turkey, the roast beef platter, with Yorkshire puddings piled high at one end of the dish, roast potatoes on the other, and the meat in splendor in the center, is brought to the table with great fanfare. My mother, now 85, is still in charge of the carving. The crispy trimmings are hers by rights—carver's perks.

Traditional English Roast Beef

For a spicier marinade, add 2 teaspoons chili powder. *Serves six to eight, with leftovers.*

Standing rib roast with three to four ribs (7 to 8 lb.), trimmed 2 tsp. dry mustard 2 tsp. sugar 2 tsp. Dijon mustard Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Cut away any excess fat from the roast, but leave a thin layer. Combine the dry mustard, sugar, and Dijon

mustard and rub the mixture over the fat and the cut surfaces of the roast. Refrigerate the roast at least 2 hours or overnight.

Heat the oven to 450°F. Set the roast, rib side down, in a heavy, shallow roasting pan. (The ribs act as a natural rack.) Score the fat to encourage crispness. Sprinkle the roast with salt and pepper.

Sear the meat in the hot oven for 15 min. Lower the heat to 350° and cook, basting every 15 min., until done to your liking:

- ◆ rare—12 to 15 minutes per pound; 125° to 130°F internal temperature
- ◆ medium—15 to 18 minutes per pound; 140° to 145°F internal temperature
- ♦ well done—18 to 20 minutes per pound; 160° to 165°F internal temperature

Remove the roast from its pan and transfer to a platter. Let the roast rest for 15 min. under a tent of foil before carving.

Roast Beef Gravy

The key question with beef gravy is whether or not to thicken it with flour or to leave it as a thin but tasty *jus*. We always made flour-thickened gravy at home.

Caramelized juices from the roasting pan 2 Tbs. flour 2 cups beef stock or water Salt and freshly ground black pepper

After removing the beef from the roasting pan, pour off all but 2 Tbs. of the fat, leaving the juices, which may have already caramelized to brown bits. Set the roasting pan on the stove over medium heat and, if necessary, simmer the juices until they darken to brown bits, 1 to 2 min.

Stir in the flour and cook, scraping up the caramelized bits with a spoon or whisk, until the flour is a deep, golden brown, about 3 min. Add the beef stock or water. Bring the gravy to a boil, stirring until it thickens. It should very lightly coat the back of a spoon. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Strain the gravy into a gravy boat and serve.

Anne Willan is the founder and president of L'Ecole de Cuisine La Varenne in Burgundy, France, and La Varenne at The Greenbrier in West Virginia. She has written more than 30 cookbooks.



Brussels sprouts add a touch of green, but roast beef takes center stage in this hearty winter meal.

Wine Choices

Subtly spicy reds enhance roast beef

A fine aged Burgundy, with its deep, woodsy aromas and subtle spice, would go perfectly with this classic roast beef feast. But these French wines can be hard to come by and even harder to afford. Thankfully, you can find excellent alternatives, at

better prices, closer to home.

Burgundy's Pinot Noir grape thrives in cool coastal areas, such as Califomia's Carneros district (look for Saintsbury, Bouchaine, or Truchard), Sonoma's Russian River region, and Santa Barbara County. Oregon also turns out some very high quality Pinots. Adelsheim, Amity, and Domaine Drouhin are all worth searching out.

For a winter holiday meal, a deep Bordeaux-style wine can be wonderful. To make this more intense wine work with this meal, choose one that's low in tannin, so as not to overpower the smooth, tender beef.

Merlot's tannins taste softer than those of Cabernet, so a Cabernet with Merlot blended in, a Bordeaux-style "meritage" blend (try Estancia's, or "Trilogy" from Flora Springs), or a Merlot itself (look for Fetzer's "Eagle Peak" if you're watching the budget; Matanzas Creek if you're not) will likely taste far smoother than a full-fledged Cabernet. And since tannins soften over time, older wines work better than younger ones.

—Rosina Tinari Wilson is a food and wine writer and teacher based in the San Francisco area. She is a contributing editor for Fine Cooking.



hen I was studying cooking, one of my teachers was a real fan of infused oils. He liked the fact that these colorful, intensely flavored oils (which he made himself) could add richness and character to food without adding the heaviness of butter and cream. I was amazed that something so delicious and versatile was so easy to make.

When I began my own cooking career, there wasn't a bottle of infused oil to be found in stores. I also started to make my own, both at home and at work. Many flavors of oil have since found their way

into my marinades, vinaigrettes, and sauté pans.

Just a few drops of infused oil contain a lot of flavor. You can use the oil for sautéing and stir-frying, but its flavor is most intense if you use it uncooked. Infused oils make wonderful vinaigrettes and marinades, and there's nothing better than a grilled portobello mushroom drizzled with garlic-rosemary oil. Infused oils also contribute to quick meals: Boil pasta, toss it with fresh tomatoes and basil, and add tomato-basil oil to match. Pair the dish with salad and bread and you have a midweek feast.



Hot method for fresh ingredients. Fresh ingredients, such as herbs and garlic, must be heated with the oil for several minutes in order to pasteurize them, which prevents spoilage. The heat also releases the flavor of fresh ingredients into the oil.

Start by putting the flavorings and the oil in a deep, nonaluminum pot (aluminum can sometimes give ingredients a grayish cast). Heat the pot over low heat and gradually bring the temperature of the mixture to 220°F, monitoring it with a thermometer. Keep the temperature between 220°F and 250°F for 20 minutes—too low a temperature means you might not kill off all the bacteria; too high, and you can scorch the ingredients and ruin the taste of the oil. Also, every time you heat an oil, you shorten its shelf life. You only want as much heat as necessary to get the flavor in and the bacteria out. During cooking, stir a few times to keep the seasoning, which probably will be sizzling a bit, from sticking to the pan.

Once the 20 minutes are up, take the pan from the heat and let it cool to room temperature—don't try to pour hot oil. Line a strainer with two layers of cheesecloth and set it over a clean, dry bottle or jar. Strain the oil into the bottle, gently pressing on the solids to get as much oil as you can without pushing the solids through. If your bottle has a very narrow neck, strain into a jar and then pour from the jar into your bottle. Seal the container for storage, or use the oil right away.

Cold method for dry ingredients. Heat can scorch dry spices and affect their flavor, so no cooking is used in this method. Also, dried spices don't present the same risk of bacterial growth as fresh ingredients. For the cold method, you stir the spices with room-temperature oil in a clean, dry container. Cover the container and leave it to infuse at room temperature for three days. Every day you'll need to stir or shake the oil again so that the spices stay distributed through the oil for a fuller transfer of flavors. On the third day, taste the oil; if it seems weak, leave it for another day or two. When the flavor is to your liking, let the spices settle completely to the bottom

To get the most flavor from your infused oils, use them straight. Just a few drops can brighten salads, soups, steamed vegetables, even fish or meat.

Infused oils taste complex, but they're as easy to make as brewing a cup of tea. Once you understand the method, all that's left is deciding which flavors to use, organizing a few simple pieces of equipment, and learning how to store the finished oil to keep it fresh.

TWO METHODS OF INFUSION: HOT AND COLD

There are two ways to make an infusion, and your choice will depend on which flavoring ingredients you choose.





For hot infusions, simmer at least 20 minutes at 220°F. Watch the thermometer carefully; if the oil goes above 250°, the infusion can bum; below 220°, you might not kill all bacteria.

and strain through cheesecloth and seal as for the hot method (see p. 41). The oil is ready to use.

USE STRONG SEASONINGS AND A MILD, FRESH OIL

Homemade

infused oils have

a freshness and

an intensity of

be matched.

flavor that can't

You can use any herb, spice, or seasoning (including tomatoes, garlic, and ginger) to infuse oil. It's easy to create oils with interesting flavor combinations to use for ethnic cooking—something hot and spicy to use with Tex-Mex food, garlicky and flavored with herbs for Italian dishes, or aromatic and pungent with ginger

to add an Asian accent to dishes.

Different seasonings have different levels of intensity, so exact amounts are a matter of experimentation and tasting. A general rule, however, is ½ cup dried spices or 1 packed cup fresh herbs for every 2 cups of oil.

For freshness, start with an unopened bottle of oil. I prefer canola, but any mild-tasting vegetable oil is fine. Because olive oil will add its own assertive flavor, I like to use it only with other Mediterranean ingredients, such as garlic, rosemary, tomato, and basil.

YOU NEED JARS, A PAN, AND A THERMOMETER

Once you've selected the flavor you want, you need only a few pieces of equipment.

Choose the right container. Both containers—one for steeping and one for storage—should have tight closures. Also, be sure the containers are perfectly clean and dry; moisture can spoil the oil. I prefer glass, but plastic is fine.

Hot oils need a thermometer and a heavy pot. You can't make hot-infused oils without a deep-frying thermometer. A few degrees separate an oil that's fragrant and flavorful from one that's scorched. To



For cold infusions, stir...
Blend toasted dry spices
with oil.



...and let settle. Steep the spices in the oil for a few days before filtering them out.

heat the oil safely, you'll also need a heavy pot that's large enough to hold the oil and the flavorings, and still have a little room for safety. Don't worry if the thermometer touches the bottom of the pot; the reading will still be accurate.

While hot infusion is easy to do, please remember that you're working with very hot oil, which can cause severe burns. Be aware of what you're doing, and wait until the oil is completely cool before straining it.

HANDLE INFUSED OILS WITH CARE

Whether you give infused oils as gifts or keep them for yourself, be sure you get the longest shelf life out of your infusions.

Don't leave herbs in the infused oil. Use a fine strainer lined with cheesecloth. Solids left in the oil will deteriorate, which can make the oil rancid.

Keep infused oil in the refrigerator. This extends shelf life and prevents bacterial development. Chilling may cloud the oil, but it's still fine, and it will clear once the oil returns to room temperature.

Check the taste and aroma before you use it. All oils eventually oxidize, which gives them an off taste and aroma. Hot-infused oils will age more quickly than cold infusions, but generally an infused oil is good for anywhere between one and six months. Shelf-life variables range from the way the unflavored oil was made to the type of flavorings you put in the oil. For example, rosemary is an antioxidant, which means it can slow the oil's oxidation.

Heat infused oils gently. Infused oils should not be used in pan- and deep-frying. These methods require the oil to remain at high temperatures for long periods, which would make infused oils scorch. For sautéing and stir-frying, however, infused oils are wonderful; the small amount of oil used is quickly



Both hot- and cold-infused oils must be strained. It's important that every bit of solids is removed from the oil. Use a strainer lined with a double thickness of cheesecloth.

absorbed by the food, which prevents the oil from reaching damaging temperatures. Still, the pan's heat bears watching, since infused oils reach their smoking point more quickly than unflavored oils. If an infused oil starts to smoke in the pan, it's too hot and will taste terrible. The oil is ready to use when you can catch the infusion's heady aroma.

Indian Spice Infused Oil

This oil is spicy but not hot. Yields 1 cup.

2 Tbs. whole cumin seeds

2 Tbs. whole coriander seeds

1 cinnamon stick, 2 inches lona

1 tsp. whole cloves

1 tsp. whole black peppercorns

2 bay leaves

6 whole green cardamom pods

1 tsp. ground turmeric

1 cup canola or other mild oil

Prepare the spices—Heat a heavy frying pan over medium heat. Toss all the spices together except the turmeric and put them in the hot pan. Dry-toast the spices, stirring them constantly for 10 min., or until they turn a few shades darker and begin to release their aromas. Transfer them to a bowl and let them cool completely. Add the turmeric and then grind all the spices to a fine powder in a spice mill, a clean coffee grinder, or a blender.

Stir the spices in with the oil in a clean, dry container. Cover and let sit at room temperature for three days, or until the desired taste is reached. Stir or shake once a day. Strain through cheesecloth into a clean, dry bottle. (For details, see p. 41.)

Smoky Southwestern Infused Oil

When toasting the spices, turn on the vent fan to disperse any chile fumes. Yields 3/4 cup.

3 dried ancho or New Mexico chiles. stems removed and torn into small pieces 3 Tbs. whole cumin seeds

1 Tbs. whole coriander seeds ½ tsp. whole black peppercorns 1 tsp. dried oregano 1/2 tsp. cayenne Pinch freshly ground nutmeg 1 cup canola or other mild oil

Toast and grind the spices as described in the recipe at left, leaving out the oregano, cayenne, and nutmeg. Add these to the cooled, ground spices and continue with the technique described in the preceding recipe.

Ginger & Sichuan Peppercorn Oil

This oil is great for stir-fries. Although there are dried spices in this hot-infused oil, they won't scorch. Yields 23/4 cups.

1/4 lb. fresh ginger, peeled and sliced into 1/4-inch-thick disks

3 Tbs. Sichuan peppercorns

1 tsp. red pepper flakes 3 cups peanut oil

In a deep pot, bring all ingredients to 220° to 250°F for 20 min. Let cool, and then strain through cheesecloth into a clean, dry bottle. (For details, see p. 41.)

Garlic-Rosemary Oil

Try drizzling this oil over grilled lamb chops. Yields 13/4 cups.

20 cloves garlic, peeled

Two 5-inch sprigs fresh rosemary, cut into thirds 2 cups olive or canola oil

Follow the technique described in the recipe above. The garlic will be begin to bubble slightly, and after about 10 min. it will begin to color, but it shouldn't brown significantly.

Fresh Tomato-Basil Oil

Make this oil in the summer when tomatoes are at their best. Yields 21/2 cups.

2 large, ripe tomatoes (about 1 lb.), seeded and chopped

1 packed cup fresh basil leaves, washed and thoroughly dried

1 tsp. red pepper flakes

5 cloves garlic, peeled

3 cups olive oil

Follow the technique described in the recipe above.

Jeffrey Peppet has cooked in restaurants throughout New England. He is the former owner of Truffles, a gourmet store, café, and catering company in Marblehead, Massachusetts. •



HILE

Infused oils make inspired holiday gifts. Try dividing a batch among small, good-quality glass bottles.



Many vegetables respond deliciously to roasting, especially roots. Just toss the trimmed vegetables with oil, season, and roast until tender and caramelized.

Slow-Roasting Vegetables

Oven-cooking coaxes out the sweet flavor of winter vegetables

BY LUCIA WATSON

ome January, I long for the sweet young peas, tender asparagus, and ripe red tomatoes that were so abundant at the farmers' market last summer. But I can't have them. So during these cold months in Minneapolis, I take heart in the fact that winter is the perfect season for roasting vegetables: the hot oven heats my kitchen, the toasty aroma fills my home, and the taste of sweetly caramelized vegetables pleases my palate.

The dry heat and long cooking time of roasting concentrates and intensifies the flavor of many vegetables. Though spring and summer standouts such as asparagus, zucchini, and corn taste great when roasted, such wintertime staples as potatoes, carrots, winter squash, and parsnips seem especially well suited to this treatment. As these vegetables roast, their fibrous insides turn meltingly tender and their sugars come to the surface, where they caramelize into a sweet, golden coating.

Roasting also transforms garlic, shallots, and onions, making them gentle and sweet. It coaxes the dusky, woody nature out of mushrooms and gives anemic winter tomatoes, as well as other out-of-season produce, more flavor.

Some vegetables don't take well to roasting. Members of the cabbage family, including broccoli, Brussels sprouts, and cauliflower, become bitter and pungent in dry heat. Leafy greens will simply wilt.

You can roast vegetables singly or paired with another vegetable. Roasted beets, for example, can make a dramatic side dish, while asparagus roasted with mushrooms and tarragon vinegar draws raves from my restaurant's customers. You can also roast a variety of other vegetables for a dish of contrasting taste, color, and texture.

ROASTING IS AN EASY AND FORGIVING METHOD

Although some vegetables may take an hour or longer to roast, the preparation is straightforward:

♦ Wash the vegetables and peel those with a tough outer skin. Leave the peel on potatoes, if you like. If you're roasting a whole head of garlic, pull off any of the loose paper, but don't peel the cloves themselves.



If the skin is thick, peel it. Vegetables like sweet potatoes and winter squash need peeling before roasting. Those with thinner skins, such as peppers, new potatoes, and eggplant, roast well unpeeled.

Even pieces for even cooking. Cut all vegetables into uniform chunks so the pieces cook at the same rate and the dishlooks neat.

- ◆ Cut or slice the vegetables into even-sized pieces, usually about one-to two-inch chunks. Smaller pieces cook more quickly, but if the vegetables are cut too small, they may break down to mush.
- ♦ Toss the vegetables with oil. Like roasted meats, roasted vegetables will dry out without fat; coating them with a bit of oil keeps them moist while roasting and helps to create a golden-brown surface.
- ◆ Add seasonings. Toss the uncooked vegetables with good amount of coarse salt and hardy fresh herbs, such as rosemary, sage, and oregano, which can stand the heat. More delicate herbs, such as basil, parsley, and chives, are best added after the vegetables are roasted. Avoid using dried herbs when roasting because they can become bitter. Flavored oils and vinegars, such as walnut oil or raspberry vinegar, add yet another dimension to the vegetable's flavor. As with herbs, I add those with strong flavors (balsamic vinegar, for example) before roasting. More delicately flavored oils and vinegars (tarragon vinegar, for example) I add afterwards.
- ◆ Spread the vegetables out in a baking pan. After seasoning the vegetables,



I arrange them in a single layer for even roasting.

◆ Roast in a 450°F oven. Once I've put the vegetables in the oven, I walk away. I come back to shake the pan once or twice during cooking to keep the vegetables from sticking to the pan and to help them cook evenly.

THE GOAL IS FORK TENDER AND WELL BROWNED

Some vegetables need only 10 or 15 minutes in the oven; others may take as long as an hour. When roasting a variety of vegetables, start with those that cook

longest. Sturdy carrots, parsnips, potatoes, winter squash, and mushrooms lead the pack; add tomatoes, fennel, and peppers next. Tender peas, corn, lima beans, and other delicate vegetables need little time in the oven and should be added toward the end of cooking. I've given some suggested cooking times (see the sidebar below), which come in handy when cooking a medley of vegetables, but the times listed are just suggestions. Take the vegetables out of the oven when they're done to your liking. If you like your onions darkly caramelized, keep them in the oven longer; if you like your asparagus on the firm side, take it out earlier. I like my roasted vegetables "overcooked" just a little, with an irresistible dark crust and sweet, tender center.

ROASTED VEGETABLES ADD RICH FLAVOR TO A VARIETY OF DISHES

You can serve roasted vegetables alone as a side dish, as a first course, or as a warm salad drizzled with some vinaigrette. They taste just as good—some say better—at room temperature, making them a great choice for the holiday buffet table. You can cook them along with roasted meat, poultry, or fish, or you can toss them with pasta and a little cheese to make them the focus of the meal. Here are some ways I like to feature roasted vegetables:

◆ To make a soup—Create a satisfying winter soup by simmering roasted red



A coating of oil keeps vegetables moist. Use your hands to toss the vegetables if you like. Add salt and other seasonings now to distribute evenly.

peppers and roasted Roma tomatoes in chicken stock to cover, with a few sprigs of thyme or marjoram. Purée the soup in a blender and serve with a dollop of sour cream or plain yogurt. You can make any number of soups using different roasted vegetables.

- ◆ **To top pizza**—Try roasted vegetables on top of pizza or focaccia dough. Sprinkle with grated Asiago cheese and bake until the cheese is bubbly and golden.
- ◆ To bake in a casserole—Create a simple, one-dish supper of a roasted

Cooking time depends on the vegetable

This range of cooking times is based on roasting the vegetables in a 450°F oven. Actual cooking times vary according to your oven's temperature, the ripeness of the vegetable, and—most importantly—your own preference.



Long-cooking vegetables (30 minutes to an hour): Beets, carrots, whole heads of garlic, mushrooms, onions, parsnips, potatoes, rutabagas, sweet potatoes, turnips, winter squash.



Medium-cooking vegetables (15 to 30 minutes): Eggplant, fennel, garlic cloves, okra, bell peppers, chiles, summer squash, tomatoes, zucchini.



Quick-cooking vegetables (10 to 15 minutes): Asparagus, corn, lima beans, peas, string beans.



Roasted vegetables taste great at room temperature as well as hot out of the oven, which means they work well on the holiday buffet table.

vegetable casserole by spooning vegetables roasted with oregano and thyme into a buttered casserole dish. Top with feta cheese and toasted breadcrumbs and bake until the cheese is soft and the crumbs golden.

◆ To mash into dip—Roasted eggplant makes a great dip for pita bread. Scrape the flesh of the roasted eggplant into a food processor or blender (discard the skin) and purée with a tablespoon of olive oil, a teaspoon of lemon juice, some mashed roasted garlic, and salt and pepper to taste.

No matter how you use your roasted vegetables, their homey goodness makes them a sure bet for gracing winter meals.

Roasted Winter Vegetables

Rosemary's piny flavor complements the natural sweetness of sweet potatoes and parsnips. *Serves four.*

2 medium carrots (about 8 oz.), peeled and cut into ¾-inch chunks
 1 medium onion, cut into 1-inch pieces
 1 medium sweet potato (about 8 oz.), peeled and cut into 1-inch cubes

8 oz. mixed mushrooms, cut (if necessary)
into 1-inch pieces
2 medium parsnips (about 8 oz.), peeled
and cut into 1-inch cubes
10 garlic cloves, peeled
3 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
1 Tbs. balsamic vinegar
2 tsp. coarse salt
1 Tbs. chopped fresh rosemary
Chopped fresh parsley for garnish

Heat the oven to 450°F. In a large bowl, toss the carrots, onion, sweet potato, mushrooms, parsnips, and garlic with the olive oil, balsamic vinegar, salt, and rosemary.

Spread the vegetables out in a baking pan just large enough to hold them in one layer. (If the pan is too big, the vegetables may dry out too much and burn.) Roast in the hot oven, shaking the pan once or twice, about 50 min. The vegetables are done when they turn a toasty caramel color and are fork tender. Garnish with chopped fresh parsley and serve hot or at room temperature.

Lucia Watson keeps warm cooking at her Minneapolis restaurant, Lucia's. She was assisted in writing this article by Beth Dooley. Together they wrote Savoring the Seasons of the Northern Heartland (Knopf, 1994).

Create your own combinations



Earthy mushrooms and sweet asparagus pair well when roasted and tossed with a little walnut oil and tarragon vinegar.

The fun of roasting vegetables is coming up with your own combinations of vegetables, herbs, oils, and vinegars. Here are some possibilities to get you thinking.

- butternut squash with hazelnut oil
- asparagus and mushrooms with walnut oil and tarragon vinegar
- potatoes and garlic with olive oil and rosemary
- beets and shallots with raspberry vinegar
- ♦ corn and peas with olive oil, basil, and mint
- wild mushrooms with olive oil,
 balsamic vinegar, sage, and thyme
- ◆ red onions with olive oil and sherry vinegar
- eggplant and garlic with toasted sesame seed oil and rice vinegar
- ◆ zucchini, fennel, and tomatoes with olive oil and parsley

Adding a Savory Crunch to Fish

A seasoned topping and a very hot oven produce a crisp layer of extra flavor

BY MARTHA HOLMBERG

hen a good fish market opened in my neighborhood, I started buying fresh fish a couple of times a week. At first, the pleasure of being able to choose among lots of firm, sweetsmelling, glistening fish inspired me to cook my selections simply, grilling them with a few herbs and olive oil or sautéing them with just a sprinkle of seasonings. But I must admit that, after a few weeks, I started getting bored with unadorned fish, as fresh as it was. I wanted more—crunch, complexity, vibrant flavors.

So I came up with an easy "topping" technique that adds a whole new dimension to the plain fish. The method is simple: just mix up either breadcrumbs, nuts, or grated potato with seasonings and oil or butter, spread the mixture on the fish, and bake at a very high temperature. The result is fish that's moist inside with a crisp, savory crust on top.

USE ANY FISH YOU LIKE, JUST TRIM TO MAKE IT EVEN

Just about any fish will adapt well to this method, though I wouldn't choose a very firm fish, such as tuna, shark, or swordfish; their meaty textures won't be enhanced by the delicately crunchy topping. The kind of fish you use isn't as important as the shape of the fillet, which should be thick (3/4 to 1 inch is best), and



Butterfly uneven fillets to give them a uniform shape. First, make a cut about halfway through the thick part of the fillet.

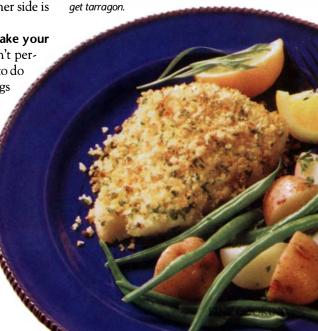


Next, fold the flap back so it lines up with the thin part of the fillet. Press lightly to make the whole piece an even thickness.

the thickness needs to be even. The toppings take about 15 minutes in the oven to get properly crisp and cooked through, so you don't want a thin little fillet that will be leathery after being in a hot oven that long. You also want the fish to cook evenly, which it won't do if one side of the fillet is ½ inch thick and the other side is 1½ inches.

A simple fold or cut can make your fish even. Since most fish aren't perfect 1-inch slabs, you may need to do some manipulation to get things right. If the fish you're dying to cook is very thin, say a pearly white fillet of flounder, you can fold it in half and press down lightly to make it a thicker piece. If you have a fabulous fillet of halibut that slopes from thick to thin, you can make an incision through the thick part, fold the flap back so it rests on the thin part, give it a

Fresh tarragon and lemon zest are the primary seasonings in this topping; parsley is a good substitute when you can't





topping get a kick from a thin layer of horseradish on the fish. Don't pile the potatoes on too thick or they won't get crisp.

The potatoes in the crunchy

Pine nuts develop a delightful crunch and rich flavor as they toast in the hot

oven, making them an ideal choice for toppings.

gentle pat, and you've got an even piece of fish. (See photos at left.)

If you use a steak instead of a fillet, take the central bones out first, since it will be difficult to locate them once the steak is topped and baked.

CHOOSE TOPPINGS TO ACCENT THE MILD FLAVOR OF FISH

You can be inventive with what you put into the toppings, using breadcrumbs, nuts, or potatoes as the neutral background and adding whatever herbs and seasonings you like. But don't add something that will burn easily or taste bad when cooked at high temperatures; for example, sun-dried tomatoes or olives can be acrid tasting when they're cooked in dry heat.

Don't use too much seasoning. A topping that's very zesty and assertive can overwhelm the flavor of the fish. The topping is meant to be an accent, not the dominating component of the dish.

Don't skimp on the fat. While the end result should be crisp and light, not rich, you need enough oil or butter so that the nuts, crumbs, and potatoes can "fry" in the fat, becoming brown, toasty flavored, and crisp textured.

Make sure the oven is truly up to temperature before you begin cooking. High heat is critical to cook the fish quickly before it has a chance to dry out. High heat also improves the taste of the fish and the topping, since the ingredients caramelize and deepen in flavor. Be sure to check the fish about halfway through the suggested cooking time. If the topping looks like it's going to burn, turn down the heat slightly or cover the fish very loosely with a piece of aluminum foil.

Cod Fillets with Mustard-Tarragon Crumb Crust

Serves two.

4 Tbs. coarse fresh breadcrumbs
1 Tbs. chopped fresh tarragon
½ tsp. grated lemon zest
2 tsp. melted butter
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
2 cod fillets, about 6 oz. each and 1 inch thick
(cut and fold for an even thickness; see photos)
½ tsp. Dijon mustard

Heat the oven to 450°F. In a small bowl, gently mix the crumbs, tarragon, lemon zest, melted butter, and a little salt and pepper.

Spread each fillet with $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp. mustard and season with more salt and pepper. Carefully pat the crumb topping over the surface of each fillet, pressing lightly so it sticks.

Brush a little oil onto a small baking sheet or shallow baking pan and set the fillets on the oiled spot (or use a nonstick pan). Bake the fish in the hot oven until the topping is golden brown and crisp and the fish is tender all the way through when you poke it with a thin knife or a skewer, 10 to 15 min. If the topping seems like it's going to burn before the fish is done, turn the heat down to 375°. Serve immediately.

Salmon Fillets with Horseradish-Potato Crust

Serves two.

1 small boiling potato, about the size of a jumbo egg, boiled until just tender, chilled, and peeled

Salt and freshly ground black pepper
2 tsp. oil or melted butter
1½ tsp. prepared horseradish
2 salmon fillets, about 6 oz. each and 1 inch thick
(cut and fold to an even thickness; see photos)

Heat the oven to 400°F. Grate the potato using the large holes of a box grater, but don't apply too much pressure—you want fairly thin shavings. Season with salt and pepper and toss with the oil or melted butter.

Spread half the horseradish on each fillet and season with a little more salt and pepper. Gently pat the potato topping on the surface of each fillet, pressing lightly so it sticks.

Bake according to the instructions in the recipe at left, but note the lower temperature in this recipe. Cook the fish for 15 to 18 min. If the fish is almost cooked but the potato topping isn't crisp, switch the oven to broil for the last few minutes. Serve immediately.

Halibut Fillets with Pine Nut & Parmesan Crust

Serves two.

4 Tbs. pine nuts, chopped

2 Tbs. grated fresh Parmesan or Asiago cheese ¼ tsp. minced garlic

2 tsp. chopped fresh herbs (I like a mix of basil, mint, and sage)

Tiny pinch cayenne

2 tsp. olive oil

2 halibut fillets, about 6 oz. each and 1 inch thick (cut and fold to an even thickness; see photos) Salt

Heat the oven to 450°F. In a small bowl, gently mix the chopped pine nuts, Parmesan, garlic, herbs, cayenne, and olive oil.

Season the fish with a little salt. Carefully pat the nut topping over the surface of each fillet, pressing lightly so it sticks. Bake according to the instructions in the recipe above left.

Martha Holmberg is the editor of Fine Cooking. ◆

Photos: Rita Maas

Winter is the Time for Parsnips

Many cooking methods enhance the subtle sweetness of this humble root, whether in soups, French fries, or muffins

BY JESSE COOL



The sweet flavor of the white root becomes more intense during cold weather.

Behold the pale parsnip. It may lack the flashy color of its cousin the carrot, but it has an earthy sweetness I love. And cooking with parsnips is a real pleasure because they respond beautifully to steaming, simmering in stew or soup, roasting, mashing, puréeing, and deep-frying. You can even bake parsnips into quick breads. Though parsnips are harvested year-round, cold weather turns the root's carbohydrates to sugars, making them sweetest in winter, so now is the time to give them a try if you haven't yet been introduced.

PICKING THE PERFECT PARSNIP

With parsnips, bigger isn't necessarily better. Larger roots do have a rich, deep flavor, and they're marvelous when mashed like potatoes or slow-cooked in soups. But larger roots often have a woody texture, especially at the core.

When buying parsnips, examine them as you would a carrot. They should feel heavy and firm, not limp. Look for parsnips with tight skins; avoid those that are shriveled or that have cracks or large bruises. Once you've brought them home, refrigerate your parsnips in a plastic bag until you're ready to use them. They'll keep this way for several weeks.

Whether to peel parsnips depends on how you plan to use them. When I make parsnip fries (see recipe on p. 52), I don't bother peeling because you don't notice the skin once the root has been fried. But for a more refined treatment, such as a puréed parsnip soup (see recipe on p. 52), I peel them so that there won't be any bits of skin in the finished soup. If you don't peel your parsnip, scrub the outer skin thoroughly to remove any dirt or small roots.

For best flavor, remove the core. The core of a small parsnip usually isn't worth removing, but as a parsnip grows larger, so does its core, which is



Larger parsnips are better cored. As the parsnip ages, its core becomes woody and flavorless. Simply quarter the root lengthwise and cut out the darker core.

flavorless and stringy. To remove the core from an uncooked parsnip, first cut the root in half lengthwise, and then again into lengthwise quarters. Use the tip of a sharp knife to cut out the dark, heavy-grained core. If you're cooking the parsnip whole, you can easily remove the core after it has been cooked. Just slice the parsnip lengthwise and scoop out the core with a spoon.

COOK PARSNIPS FOR THE MOST FLAVOR

You can eat parsnips raw, but they taste better when cooked; their starchy insides soften, and their flavor becomes more intense. Steaming works best for young, tender roots because it preserves their delicate flavor. The larger roots have a stronger flavor that stands up well to frying and roasting.

Steam parsnips to lock in flavor. When it comes to root vegetables, I prefer steaming to boiling. Boiling leaches flavor and vitamins from the vegetable into the cooking liquid. Steaming keeps the parsnip's sweet flavor locked in. I boil parsnips only when they're an ingredient in a soup or stew and when the

cooking liquid will also be included in the finished dish.

To steam parsnips, cut the root into even-sized pieces, put the pieces in a steamer basket and set the basket over simmering water. A handful of fresh herbs or orange slices in the steaming water can add a subtle flavor to the parsnips.

Parsnip's sweet flavor takes well to roasting. I love to roast parsnips, too. The inside of the root becomes

tender while the outside caramelizes to seal in the sweet flavor. I often serve them as an appetizer, warm atop a bed of lightly dressed greens, or cool with a spicy, garlicky aioli. To roast parsnips, simply cut them into even-sized chunks, rub them with olive oil, and sprinkle them with salt and pepper. Put them in a roasting pan and into a 400°F oven until they're tender, about 45 minutes. You can also add parsnips to the pan when roasting meat; just add them during the last hour of cooking. The

Parsnip pairs with its cousin the carrot for a deeply sweet soup with a golden hue. A healthy dose of fresh ginger adds a little zing.



Cold parsnips make crisp fries. Refrigerating the cut parsnips before frying ensures that they'll develop a crisp-fried coating.

parsnips' flesh will absorb the flavors of the meat while naturally sweetening the pan juices.

Deep-fried parsnips are a sweet alternative to potato fries. I've found that to get extra-crispy fries, the parsnips must be very cold before frying. After cutting the parsnips into ½-inch-thick sticks, I refrigerate them in a bowl of water. Just before frying, I drain them and pat them completely dry

Large roots have a rich, deep flavor, and they're marvelous when mashed like potatoes or slow-cooked in soups. with a towel. Parsnip chips are a great variation on parsnip fries—made the same way but sliced wafer thin like potato chips.

Raw parsnips are a treat, as long as they're tender. Pars-

nips cut into paper-thin rounds are an interesting addition to a vegetable platter or served topped with a spreadable, slightly salty cheese. Grated parsnips add crunch and variety to a green salad and pair especially well with slightly bitter greens.

Spicy Garlic Parsnip Fries

Garlic and chile peppers provide a wonderfully spicy accent to these subtly sweet fries. They're delicious served with grilled meats. Serves four to six as a side dish or snack.

1½ Ib. parsnips
2 Tbs. olive oil
6 large cloves garlic, chopped fine
1 fresh or 2 dried chiles (cayenne, jalapeño, or habanero), seeded and chopped fine
Peanut or vegetable oil for deep-frying
Salt to taste



Leave plenty of room when frying so the oil stays hot and crisps the parsnip fries.

Trim the tops and tips off the parsnips and cut them into $3\frac{1}{2}x\frac{1}{4}x\frac{1}{4}$ -inch sticks. Put the parsnips in a bowl, cover with water, and refrigerate until you're ready to fry.

Heat the olive oil in a small sauté pan. Sauté the chopped garlic over medium heat until pale golden brown, about 5 min. Be careful not to let it burn. Add the chopped chiles and sauté for a few more seconds. Remove the garlic and chiles from the oil with a slotted spoon and drain on paper towels.

Drain the parsnips and pat them completely dry with a towel. Fill a large cast-iron skillet with 1 inch of oil and heat until it just begins to smoke. Gently slide a few parsnip sticks into the hot oil. Don't try to fry them all at once or the heat will drop and the fries won't crisp. When the parsnips are golden brown (about 5 min.), remove them with a slotted spoon and drain on a cooling rack set over paper towels. Keep them warm in a 350°F oven until all the parsnips have been fried.

Before serving, season the parsnips with salt and sprinkle with the browned bits of garlic and chile.

Parsnip, Carrot & Ginger Soup

This simple, satisfying soup is always popular at my restaurant, the Flea Street Café. Here parsnips are paired with their more popular cousin, the carrot. A healthy dose of fresh ginger is a perfect counterpoint to the mellow sweetness of the root vegetables. Yields 8½ cups; serves six.

2 Tbs. canola or vegetable oil
2 medium onions, sliced
1 lb. parsnips, peeled and cut into 2-inch chunks
12 oz. carrots, peeled and cut into 2-inch chunks
1½ qt. chicken or vegetable stock; more as needed
¼ cup grated fresh ginger
1 tsp. dried thyme
¼ tsp. freshly grated nutmeg



A sprinkle of spicy chile for sweet, hot parsnip fries. The fries are topped with crunchy bits of sautéed hot chiles and chopped garlic.

1/4 cup sweet vermouth or other sweet white wine (optional)
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
Sour cream or crème fraîche
A few sprigs of fresh thyme

In a large pot, heat the oil over medium heat. Put the onions into the pot, cover tightly, and cook gently until the onions are soft, about 5 min. Add the parsnips, carrots, and stock. Bring to a boil, cover the pot, reduce the heat, and let simmer until the vegetables are very soft, about 30 min. Strain off the vegetables, reserving the stock. Transfer the vegetables to a food processor and purée. Gradually add the stock to the purée until the mixture is loose enough to pour. Add the ginger, thyme, nutmeg, and vermouth (if using). If necessary, thin the soup with more stock or a little heavy cream. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Serve with a dollop of sour cream or *crème fraîche* and sprigs of thyme.

Parsnip & Pecan Sour Cream Muffins

Parsnips are sweet, moist, and nutritious—perfect for muffins. Here again, the parsnip takes its cue from the carrot, as these muffins have the familiar appeal of a carrot cake. *Yields 12 muffins*.

3 oz. (6 Tbs.) butter, softened; more for greasing the pan ³/₄ cup brown sugar, lightly packed ² large eggs, beaten ¹/₂ cup chopped pecans ¹/₂ cup golden raisins ¹/₂ cups sour cream ¹/₂ cups peeled, coarsely grated parsnips (about 2 medium parsnips) ⁹ oz. (2 cups) flour ¹ Tbs. baking powder ¹ tsp. baking soda ¹ tsp. ground cinnamon ¹ tsp. ground cloves

Heat the oven to 375°F. Generously butter a standard 12-cup muffin pan. In a medium bowl, cream the butter and sugar and then add the eggs. Stir in the pecans, raisins, sour cream, and grated parsnips. In another bowl, combine the flour, baking powder, baking soda, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, and salt. Gradually add the dry ingredients to the moist ingredients, stirring just until blended. Don't overmix.

Divide the batter evenly among the buttered muffin cups. Bake until a toothpick stuck in the center of a muffin comes out clean, about 20 min. Be careful not to overbake or the muffins will be dry. Let the muffins stand for about 10 min. before turning them out onto a rack to cool.

Jesse Cool is the chef/owner of the Flea Street Café in Menlo Park, California. She likes to think of herself as a "roots cook," who rediscovers forgotten foods, which often include root vegetables. She has written several cookbooks, including Tomatoes and Onions, both from the Country Garden Cookbooks series (Harper Collins).



Freshly grated parsnips are a sweet addition to these sour cream muffins. The parsnips also help keep the muffins moist once they're baked.

1/2 tsp. ground nutmeg

Pinch salt

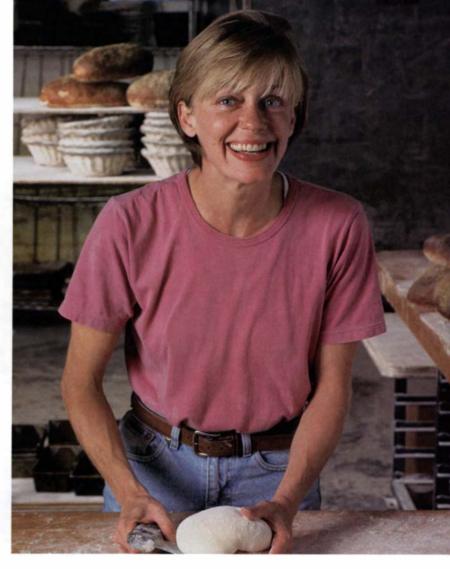




Ciabatta's dark crust indicates a better-tasting bread.

The aroma of the baking crust is absorbed by the loaf and gives it an irresistible flavor.

"Making ciabatta for the first time requires a leap of faith," says author Sarah Black. "But follow my instructions here and the wet, messy dough will indeed become a crusty, flavorful loaf of bread."



Ciabatta—Light-as-Air

This high-rising bread has a crisp crust and an exquisite flavor

BY SARAH BLACK

n Italian, *ciabatta* means "slipper." Italian bakers have so named this bread because the finished loaves can look like old shoes. While the shape of the loaf is rustic, the bread itself is light and porous and the flavor is delicately sour.

If you've never made *ciabatta* before, you may be surprised at the consistency of the dough, which contains more water than other types of bread doughs. It may be difficult to imagine that the mixture—more like a cake batter than the foundation for bread—will actually become a crusty, flavorful loaf. Making *ciabatta* (pronounced chah-BAH-tah) for the first time does requires a leap of faith. Trust me. Plunge your hands into the sticky mess and follow a few simple instructions.

My *ciabatta* is actually an interpretation of the Italian version, more a product of my imagination than culinary tradition. The doughs are essentially

Shaping the loaves

Working with one piece at a time and keeping the floured side facing down, pull five ends of the dough from the outside edge to the center, almost like you're shaping a pouch. Press these ends down and flip the dough over.





Cup the heels of your hands around the dough and rotate it by moving one hand up and the other hand down, all the while pinching the dough underneath with both heels of the hands to start shaping a ball.



Continue turning the dough until its skin is stretched taut and the mass has been shaped into a smooth ball.

Loaves from a Wet Dough

the same, but I shape mine quite differently. Italian bakers dimple the dough with their fingertips to prevent the dough from rising too high and to give an uneven texture to the crumb. When I first started experimenting with *ciabatta*, I was enchanted with how high the loaves could rise when I skipped this process altogether. Now I handle my dough as little as possible once it has risen. Instead of a flat, uneven loaf, my *ciabatta* is a big, domed oval.

A STARTER ADDS FLAVOR AND HELPS KEEP BREAD MOIST

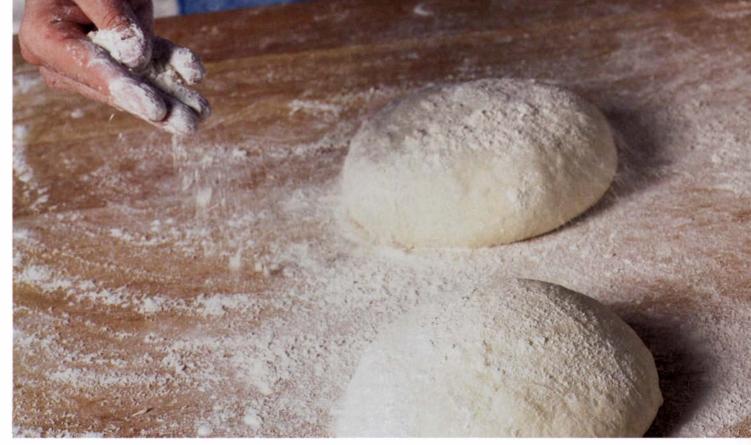
Because I make *ciabatta* every day, I use what is sometimes called a *chef*, a piece of dough left over from the previous day's batch, to flavor the bread. The *chef*, which has fermented for 24 hours, has a mildly sour taste. For home cooks who don't have a constant source of day-old dough, I recommend using a

yeast starter. A starter not only adds flavor, but it also helps the bread rise higher and keeps it moist. If you do use a *chef* for your bread, you should know that the effects of fermented dough can be unpredictable. Also keep in mind that if your *chef* contains salt, you'll want to use less salt in the *ciabatta* recipe.

THE FOUNDATION FOR A HIGH-RISING LOAF

Mixing and kneading are the most important steps of breadmaking. These steps lay the foundation that will support the loaves as they rise and bake. Mistakes made in mixing and kneading cannot easily be corrected later.

The high proportion of liquid in *ciabatta* makes it almost impossible to knead this dough by hand. I recommend using a heavy-duty electric mixer, such as a KitchenAid. But because it takes a long time to thoroughly incorporate all the water into the flour,



For a natural nonstick surface, sprinkle the loaves with flour before setting them aside for the second rise. This will keep the plastic wrap from adhering to the sticky dough.

there is a real danger of overheating the dough. An overworked dough loses it elasticity because the gluten has been stretched beyond its limits. To avoid overheating the dough, I use a technique called *autolyse* (ah-to-LEEZ). Developed by bakers in France, *autolyse* incorporates a resting period into the mixing process. The dough is mixed for three minutes, then allowed to rest for 20 minutes before the kneading is completed. During the resting period, the flour absorbs some of the liquid, in effect completing some of the mixing process on its own.

The purpose of the first three minutes of slow mixing is to equally distribute all the ingredients. As the

After the initial mixing, let the dough rest to avoid overheating. flour is moistened, the tangled gluten-forming molecules of protein begin to unfold and combine with the water. Later, when the speed is increased for kneading, the dough is stretched and compressed, developing the loosely bonded water-protein units into larger sheets of gluten.

More and more pockets of air are incorporated here, and these largely determine the final texture of the loaf. Later, as the bread rises, the fermenting yeast releases carbon dioxide into these pockets, which then expand when introduced to the heat of the oven.

For a high-rising loaf, handle with care. If you've made bread before, you're probably used to slapping the dough against the work surface and punching and pulling it into shape. But when I make *ciabatta*, I handle the risen dough gently to preserve the gases so that the loaves rise as high as they possibly can.

TURNING DOUGH INTO BREAD

The first few minutes in the oven are vitally important to bread. As the heat reaches the dough, yeast cells increase their production of carbon dioxide and the loaves quickly expand. Called "oven spring," this process sets the structure of the bread for the remaining time in the oven. Bake the loaves directly on a baking stone—it's the quickest way to transfer heat to the bread. If you don't have a stone, use a very heavy steel baking sheet. Also, introduce steam to the oven immediately before you put in the bread to keep the crust from forming too soon, which could prevent the bread from rising its highest. To do this, set a dish of ice cubes on the oven floor, or wet your baking stone with water from a spray bottle.

A dark crust means a more flavorful bread. I bake *ciabatta* until the crust is dark brown, almost burnt-looking. At the end of the baking time, the sugar and starch at the surface of the dough begin to color and form the crust. The aromas from the surface diffuse inward and make the bread more flavorful.

Later, as the bread cools, the heat and moisture from the interior of the loaf and from the crust redistribute themselves to an even temperature. When the bread has cooled completely, slice it with a bread knife. Cut gently and firmly with short strokes and then take a look inside. If your bread has been properly made, you'll find a honeycomb of moist, translucent bread surrounding enormous holes, and you will understand the thrill I experience every time I cut into one of these lovely loaves.

Starter

Once this starter has tripled in volume, you can use it right away or refrigerate it to use the next day.

½ tsp. active dry yeast 1 cup lukewarm water (110°F) 6¾ oz. (1½ cups) bread flour

Dissolve the yeast in the water. Add the flour and stir to incorporate. The mixture should have the consistency of a thick batter. Pour the mixture into a lightly oiled container, cover with plastic wrap, and let rise until tripled in volume, about 4 hours.

Ciabatta Dough

In humid weather, you may have to add up to 2 ounces more flour to the dough. *Yields 2 loaves*.

1½ tsp. active dry yeast ½ cup lukewarm water (110°F) 2 cups ice water 1 cup starter (see recipe above) 27 oz. (about 6 cups) bread flour 1 Tbs. salt

The initial mixing—Dissolve the yeast in the lukewarm water and let stand for 10 min. In a heavy-duty electric mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, combine the yeast mixture, ice water, starter, and flour. (Ice water, an unusual ingredient for bread dough, keeps the dough cool and prevents overheating.) Mix at speed #2 for 1 min. Add the salt and then mix the ingredients for 2 min. to distribute all the ingredients. Let the dough rest for 20 min. At this point, the dough will look soupy.

Kneading the dough—After the rest period, replace the paddle attachment with the dough hook, increase the mixer speed to #6, and knead the dough. The dough will be quite sticky. It has a tendency to climb the hook and stick to the sides of the bowl. Use a plastic dough scraper to scrape the dough down often. During this kneading period, keep one hand on the bowl to monitor the temperature. As long as the bowl feels cool, there's no danger of overheating the dough. If the bowl begins to get hot, stop mixing and let the dough cool a bit. A towel soaked in ice water and wrapped around the base of the bowl can help keep the temperature down. When the dough pulls completely away from the sides and bottom of the bowl (this should take 15 to 20 min.), decrease the speed to #4 and knead gently until the dough is smooth and satiny, 4 to 6 min.

The first rise.—Transfer the dough to a large, oiled mixing bowl. Lightly brush the top of the dough with oil. Cover with plastic wrap and let rise until tripled in volume, about $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours. The ideal temperature for fermentation is about 74° F, cool enough to allow the dough to rise slowly and develop its characteristic yeasty flavor.

Shaping and the second rise—Pour the dough onto a floured work surface and shape the loaves following the directions on p. 55. Set the loaves in a cool spot, dust them with flour, cover them loosely with plastic wrap, and let rise again until doubled in volume, about 2 hours.

Baking the loaves—Put a baking stone on the oven's lowest rack and heat the oven to 450°F. To prevent the loaves from sticking, sprinkle the baking stone with cornmeal just before putting the bread in the oven. To make steam, set a dish of ice cubes on the floor of your oven



Shaping panini requires a light touch.

Crisp and tender little breads

The notion of working the dough as little as possible led me to experiment with hand-cut rolls, called *panini* (pah-NEE-nee), which means little breads. I shape these rolls with a minimum of handling, so their crust is incredibly crisp and eggshell thin. The bread itself is one of the most tender I've ever tasted.

After the first rise, simply pour the dough onto a lightly floured work surface and cut it into 3-ounce rolls. I use a professional steel dough cutter, but a bench scraper or a large chef's knife will work just as well. Put the rolls on a floured surface, cover with plastic wrap, and let rise about 30 minutes. Bake at 450°F until the crust is quite dark, 20 to 25 minutes.

just before putting in the bread. If yours is an electric oven with coils on the floor, wet the stone with water from a spray bottle. Using a baker's peel or a baking sheet, gently transfer the loaves to the stone, taking care not to deflate the dough. I like to give the ends of the loaves a quick tug to stretch them into ovals, but it isn't necessary. Bake until the crust is dark brown, about 30 min. Remove the finished loaves from the oven and let them cool on a rack until you don't feel any heat when you hold your palm just above the loaf, about 1 hour.

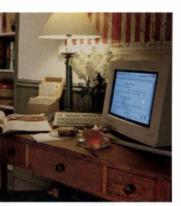
Sarah Black distributes her Italian breads under the name Companio, Latin for "one who shares bread." She's learned about baking and sharing from the folks at Tom Cat Bakery in Long Island City, New York, who graciously share their ovens with her.

Joro John Neirrel

The Newest Kitchen Appliance: Your Computer

Cooking software can help you organize recipes, write shopping lists, and plan menus

BY JEFF SIEGEL



Turn recipe-clipping clutter into clean computer printouts.

ellowed recipe collections are a cooking tradition. It's almost a badge of honor to have a pile of recipe clippings, torn in awkward places and sometimes illegible from your notes—what to use instead of heavy cream, which size roasting pan worked best, and how to make the recipe serve two instead of eight. With cooking software programs, however, that tradition of grease-stained recipe cards makes a high-tech leap.

Cooking software programs let your recipe collection migrate from the material world—where it can be the victim of stains, decay, and general forgetfulness—to the accessible, organized world of your computer.

COOKING SOFTWARE HAS MANY USES

Programs such as Mangia, MasterCook, and many others allow your computer to become a home for all those irregularly shaped and irreplaceable clippings; you can input thousands of your own recipes. The programs also offer many recipes of their own. I like using cooking software because it lets me scale any recipe up or down at the touch of a button. This is a great relief for cooks who have tried to do the math themselves, only to be faced with dividing 2¾ cups of chicken stock by three. You can also analyze nutritional content, plan menus, create shopping lists, and, if you have one, keep track of the wine cellar.

You don't have to be a computer guru to use any of the best programs on the market. All they require is a standard Windows IBM-compatible or Macintosh setup, a printer, and enough computer knowledge to use a point-and-click mouse.

WHAT YOU SHOULD EXPECT

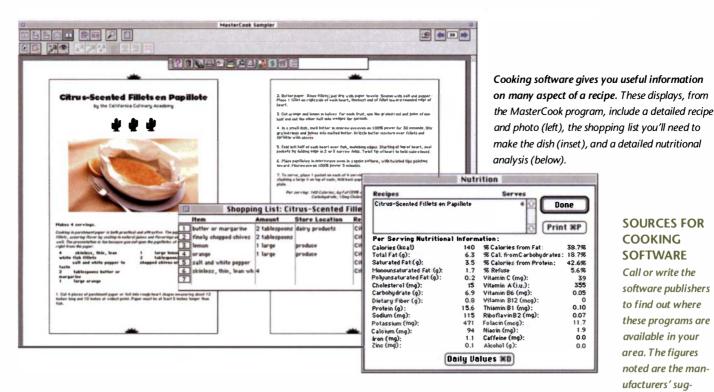
Here's a look at the important features you'll want in a good cooking software program.

Ease of use when entering recipes. The leading packages include a recipe template that makes entry little more than a fill-in-the-blanks process. One time-saver is the quick-fill function common to most applications. If the computer recognizes the ingredient or measurement after you start to type, it completes the word for you. For example, if you type "cucum," the "ber" appears automatically.

Easy printing. Perhaps the niftiest function is the software's ability to print a recipe on one sheet of paper. This finally makes obsolete the annoyance of juggling a cookbook on the counter, or flipping between columns of text clipped from the newspaper. The leading packages also allow you to change fonts and paper size, offering index cards or letter-size formats, among others. Some even let you print pictures if you have a high-resolution printer.

Checking nutritional content. Any program worth its salt lists the nutritional data for every recipe you enter. The best programs can also compare the information to the USDA's recommended daily allowances. Most also allow you to plan menus or meals based on a specific nutritional guide using their search functions.

Menu planning. The newest feature is drag and drop, which allows you to click on a recipe with your mouse, drag it across the screen to the shopping list or calendar icon, and drop it. If you drop it on the calendar icon, the name of the recipe will print on the day you choose so you won't forget to use it. If you drop it on the shopping list, the recipe's ingredients show up on the printed list. Another handy feature is often called "What's in the Pantry?" It allows you to enter a number of ingredients, cross-reference them with your recipes, and list those that include the ingredients you requested. If your counter is piled high with spinach from the farmers'



With just a click of the

mouse, convert

a recipe for twelve

into a recipe for five.

market, you can call up the recipes that will best take advantage of it.

Scaling recipes up or down. This feature keeps you from going mad when you turn a recipe for twelve into one that serves four. With menu scaling, ½ cup in a recipe for twelve becomes 2 tablespoons in a recipe for four with just a flick of the mouse.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE **LEADING PROGRAMS**

Here's a look at the some of the best-selling cooking software programs. I reviewed the most recent release of each title and highlighted its best features, as well as ones that could stand improvement.

◆ MasterCook 3.0 has a little bit of everything. The addrecipe format is easy to use. thanks to a quick-fill feature that understands 5,000 ingredients. The built-in cookbook's recipes range from the humble (sour-cream-7UP biscuits) to the exotic (mango ketchup). The program also includes a snappy nutrition-

analysis function, and it has a calendar for menu planning. Although other programs' drag-and-drop shopping lists are easier to handle, using Master-Cook's list feature is as easy as keeping track of your grocery needs on a word processor. (Released November 1995; available for the PC and Mac.)

♦ Micro Kitchen Companion 4.0 has a coupon organizer, a spell checker, and, for those with multimedia capabilities, the ability to display photos and pronounce foreign cooking terms and ingredients. It can also resize recipes, analyze nutritional value, and recommend wine for each dish. Many of the recipes included in the program come from restaurants, but they're not restaurant-difficult. Of course, you can add your own recipes—and the format is easy to use—but there's no quick-fill function. (Released September 1995; available for the PC and Mac.)

Mangia 1.2 used to be the only decent cooking software available for the Mac. It's easy to use, and it offers sophisticated printing capabilities—two strengths of any good Mac application. The recipe selection includes a good variety of innovative and classic dishes. On the other hand, it doesn't offer nutritional analysis, and it can be a pain to get the program to accept unfamiliar ingredient names.

> (Released August 1995; available for the PC and Mac.)

Micro Cookbook 5.0 and On the Menu 1.1 are the next generation of cooking software. Not only do they have a nearinfinite recipe file capacity (as well as 10,000 recipes of their own), they also have multimedia and online compatibility, as well as the easiest-to-use

shopping-list feature on the market. The difference between the two is how much multimedia they offer; Micro Cookbook has full color photos, while On THE MENU has video and sound. (It also has a section for "restaurant recipes" that's little more than an advertisement for some national chains.) Micro Cookbook is available only on CD-ROM, and both programs have hefty memory requirements. (Micro Cookbook 5.0 released September 1995; On the Menu 1.1 released January 1995; both available for the PC.)

Jeff Siegel is a freelance writer in Dallas. ◆

SOURCES FOR COOKING **SOFTWARE**

Call or write the software publishers to find out where these programs are available in your area. The figures noted are the manufacturers' suggested retail prices.

MasterCook (\$29.95)-Arion Software, 3300 Bee Cave Rd.. Suite 650-148, Austin, TX 78746: 512/327-9573.

Micro Kitchen Companion (\$49.95)---Lifestyle Software Group. 63 Orange St., St. Augustine, FL 32084: 904/825-

Mangia (\$49.95)---Upstill Software, 1442A Walnut, Berkeley, CA 94709; 800/568-3696.

Micro Cookbook/ ON THE MENU (\$29.95; \$39.95)-Pinpoint Publishing, PO Box 7329, Santa Rosa, CA 95407; 800/788-5236.

Italian soul food, polenta is close to Italy's culinary heart. Its rich corn flavor provides the perfect foil to the strongflavored cheese in this Gorgonzola Polenta (recipe on p. 63).



Color is the key to identifying polenta. Clockwise from top: fine-grain cornmeal, coarse-ground cornmeal, and polenta integra (cornmeal mixed with buckwheat flour).





Polenta— Comfort Food, Italian Style

Steady stirring is the key to smooth, creamy polenta

BY EARL LECLAIRE

Like pasta and rice,

polenta is the starting

point for an infinite

variety of dishes.

aking polenta was beneath Mama. Being from Naples, she said it was for the northern Italian *polentoni*—the "pudding-heads"—for whom it was a staple. Their cooking abilities, or anyone else's for that matter, were below those of Neapolitans. So it was with great dismay that Mama would watch my father and me leave her table to go to the homes of Venetian and Milanese friends for game sup-

pers. There we were served incredible rabbit stews, venison roasts topped with rich, dark porcini sauce, and game birds laced with reductions of pan drippings and homemade wine. And there was always polenta, steaming golden mounds of it poured out onto wooden slabs. During the fall, we ate with our friends as often as we ate in our own home. Mama never

seemed to understand it was the polenta we went for.

COARSE-GROUND CORNMEAL FOR THE BEST FLAVOR

Before the discovery of the Americas and the introduction of corn to Europe, polenta—called *pulmentum* by the early Romans—was a mush made with grains such as spelt (a hardy European wheat), millet, barley, or buckwheat, and often a mix of two or more. In modern times, polenta is made from cornmeal. Ancient milling techniques meant that grains were always ground quite coarse. Today, despite improved

milling technology, coarse-ground cornmeal is still preferred because of its superior flavor and texture.

Fine-grain cornmeal is sometimes used to make polenta. It cooks up smoother and creamier, but it lacks the rich corn taste and slightly chewy feel of the coarser grain. Italian specialty food stores sometimes carry *polenta integra*, coarse-ground cornmeal combined with buckwheat flour. Its flavor is heartier and

more robust than regular polenta.

In our convenience-obsessed world, there's even "instant" and precooked polenta. Made from cornmeal that has been hydrated and then dehydrated, instant polenta is ready in minutes, but a considerable amount of flavor and texture is lost in the process. Precooked polenta looks like a yellow sausage in a plastic casing. Its tex-

ture is rubbery and totally unappealing.

Coarse-ground polenta retains some of the corn's hull and germ, which makes it highly nutritious and flavorful but also makes it rich in oil, which means that polenta can easily turn rancid. Store it in an airtight container and keep it refrigerated; this way, polenta will stay fresh for up to four months.

SEASON WELL AND DON'T STOP STIRRING

Polenta bubbles and pops like hot lava as it cooks. Make it in a large, heavy-based pot so there's less risk of getting burned by a spurt of the hot mush. A

The basic steps for smooth polenta



Add polenta to boiling water in a slow, steady stream. Shake it gently from a measuring cup or let it run through your fingers, stirring all the while.



2 Keep your spoon in constant motion. If lumps do start to form, press them against the side of the pot to break them apart. Don't forget to scrape the sides and bottom of the pan frequently.

large pot also allows room for the polenta to expand. A heavy base distributes heat more evenly and helps prevent scorching.

The basic formula—three parts liquid to one part polenta. Like all grains, polenta must be seasoned as it cooks or its flavor will be flat. Use about 1½ teaspoons salt (I prefer sea salt) for 2 cups of uncooked polenta.

I've never had trouble making smooth polenta,

because I know the secret—stirring. I bring the liquid to a rapid boil, add the salt, and then add the cornmeal in a slow, steady stream, stirring constantly. Don't walk away to write a letter, practice yoga, or finish an etching; stay with the pan and stir! If lumps do plague you, there's a foolproof method to keep them from forming. Bring half the water to a boil and mix the polenta and salt with the remaining cold water. Slowly add this

Polenta is for dessert, too. This cinnamonscented Polenta Pudding (see recipe on p. 64) is sweetened with honey and topped with toasted hazelnuts. Serve it warm with a dollop of mascar pone or lightly whipped cream.

cornmeal "slurry" to the boiling water, stir, and cook as directed. If you can't stand the constant stirring, cook the polenta in a double boiler. The gentle heat means it will take a bit longer, but the polenta will require only an occasional stir.

Cooking times for polenta range from 10 to 30 minutes, depending upon whose mother taught them what. A friend from Bergamo claims that it takes nothing less than three hours, a bottle of robust red wine, and good talk while stirring. While extended cooking tends to "smooth out" the coarseness of the grain and is preferred by some, the polenta is done when it pulls completely away from the sides of the pot. For soft, loose polenta, cook only





3 A simple test for doneness—when the polenta begins to pull away from the sides of the pan, it's done.



A Cook further for firmer polenta.
For smoother, thicker polenta, or If it's to be molded and sautéed or fried, cook the cornmeal until it's quite thick and pulls completely away from the sides of the pan.



until it just starts to pull away from the sides of the pot (10 to 15 minutes) and serve immediately. Turn it out into a serving bowl and dig in.

If you want firm polenta to grill or sauté, cook until it's very thick and pulls completely away from the sides of the pot (20 to 30 minutes). This ensures that the polenta won't collapse into a pile of paste or drip through your grill. Spread the polenta in a lightly greased pan, let cool, and then refrigerate at least two hours before using. It will be even firmer if refrigerated overnight.

Polenta is delicious on its own, with a bit of butter or some cheese stirred in, but like pasta and rice, it is also simply a starting point for an infinite variety of dishes. Depending on how you dress it up, polenta may be served as a main dish, a side dish, an appetizer, or a dessert. Stir in some raisins and a bit of maple syrup and polenta can even be served as a hot breakfast cereal. Its simplicity, versatility, and affordability offer cooks endless opportunities to expand on existing recipes and to experiment with new ones.

The recipes presented here, and their simple variations, have been tested, tasted, and smiled over. They will surprise and please even the most skeptical cook. After all, they've pleased the greatest polenta cynic of all—who now denies she ever railed against it—Mama.

Creamy Polenta

This simple polenta side dish needs only a bit of butter to enrich it. Yields about 6½ cups; serves six to eight.

3 cups water
2 cups coarse-ground polenta
3 cups cold milk
1½ tsp. salt
½ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
2 Tbs. unsalted butter

Over high heat, bring the water to a boil. Combine the polenta with the milk and salt and stir until smooth. Slowly add this mixture to the boiling water, stirring constantly. Cook, stirring, until the polenta begins to thicken. Reduce the heat to medium and continue to cook until the polenta begins to bubble and pop. Reduce the heat to low, add the Parmesan and butter and continue stirring until the polenta begins to pull away from the sides of the pan, about 10 min. for soft polenta, or about 20 min. for firm. Serve immediately as a side dish or mold into a dish and let stand to make firmer polenta.

Gorgonzola Polenta

Rich, creamy, and filled with the tangy taste of Gorgonzola, this polenta is an irresistible accompaniment to roast chicken or pork. *Yields about 7½ cups; serves six to eight.*

1 Tbs. olive oil
1 onion, diced
1 clove garlic, minced
3 cups chicken stock, preferably homemade
2 cups coarse-ground polenta
3 cups cold milk
2 tsp. salt
2 Tbs. unsalted butter
1 cup crumbled Gorgonzola cheese
1 tsp. chopped fresh thyme, or ½ tsp. dried
¾ cup toasted, chopped walnuts

In a large saucepan, heat the oil over medium heat. Add the onion and garlic and cook until softened, about 5 min. Add the chicken stock and bring to a boil over high heat.

Meanwhile, combine the polenta with the milk and salt. Slowly add the polenta mixture to the boiling chicken stock, stirring constantly. When the polenta begins to thicken, reduce the heat to medium low and cook, stirring, until the polenta is very thick and pulls away from the sides of the pan, about 10 min. Stir in the butter until melted and smooth. Remove from the heat and stir in the Gorgonzola, thyme, and walnuts.



An uncommon lasagna. Thin-cut sheets of firm polenta bring a rich cornmeal flavor to this Italian favorite layered with mushrooms, sausage, and thick tomato sauce.

Polenta Lasagna

Slices of firm polenta take the place of pasta in this rustic "lasagna." Serves eight.

FOR THE TOMATO SAUCE:
2 Tbs. olive oil
1 green bell pepper, diced
1 onion, diced
1 clove garlic, minced
1/4 lb. mushrooms, diced
1/2 lb. sweet Italian sausage, casings removed Two 28-oz. cans crushed tomatoes
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
1/4 cup chopped fresh basil

1 recipe Creamy Polenta (see p. 63), molded into a 13x9-inch dish 4 oz. fresh mozzarella, shredded ½ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese

1/4 cup chopped fresh parsley



Slicing firm polenta in half horizontally is easy if you use a long, thin knife. To make the sauce—In a large frying pan, heat the oil over medium heat. Add the pepper, onion, and garlic and cook until the vegetables begin to soften, about 5 min. Add the mushrooms and crumble in the sausage; cook until the sausage is no longer pink, about 5 min. longer.

Stir in the tomatoes, season with about 1 tsp. salt and ½ tsp. pepper. Bring to a boil, reduce to a simmer, and cook until thick and flavorful, 45 to 50 min. Stir in the herbs. Taste for seasoning and add more salt and pepper if needed.

To assemble the lasagna—Heat the oven to 350°F. Un mold the polenta onto a work surface, cut it in half crosswise, and slice each half horizontally with a long, thin knife (see photo below). Spread ½ cup of the tomato sauce in the bottom of the 13x9-inch pan and put half the polenta on top. Layer with about 2 cups of the tomato sauce, the remaining polenta, and the remaining tomato sauce. Sprinkle the mozzarella and Parmesan cheeses on top. Bake until browned and a knife inserted in the center comes out hot, 50 to 65 min. Let rest for 15 min. before serving.

Polenta Pudding

A whole chopped orange, peel included, lends a wonderful flavor to the pudding, and any trace of bitterness is cooked away. Serves six.

1 orange, chopped coarse (including the peel and pith)

½ cup plus 1 Tbs. brown sugar

½ cup honey

½ cups milk

3 Tbs. unsalted butter

¾ tsp. ground cinnamon

¼ tsp. ground nutmeg

⅔ cup coarse-ground polenta

2 eggs, lightly beaten

2 tsp. sugar

⅓ cup toasted hazelnuts, chopped

Heat the oven to 325°F. In a food processor, combine the chopped orange and 1 Tbs. of the brown sugar. Pulse several times to mince the orange.

In a large saucepan, combine the orange mixture, the remaining ½ cup brown sugar, the honey, and 1 Tbs. water. Bring to a boil over medium heat and boil, stirring occasionally, until thick and syrupy, 8 to 10 min. Stir in the milk, 2 Tbs. of the butter, the cinnamon, and the nutmeg until well combined. Let the mixture return to a boil.

Slowly add the polenta, stirring constantly. Reduce the heat to medium low and simmer, stirring constantly, until thickened, about 2 min. Remove from the heat and whisk in the eggs until smooth. Pour the mixture into an 8-inch-square baking dish. Sprinkle with sugar and dot with the remaining 1 Tbs. butter.

Set the baking dish in a water bath. Bake until a knife inserted in the center comes out clean, 70 to 80 min. Serve warm or at room temperature, topped with the chopped hazelnuts.

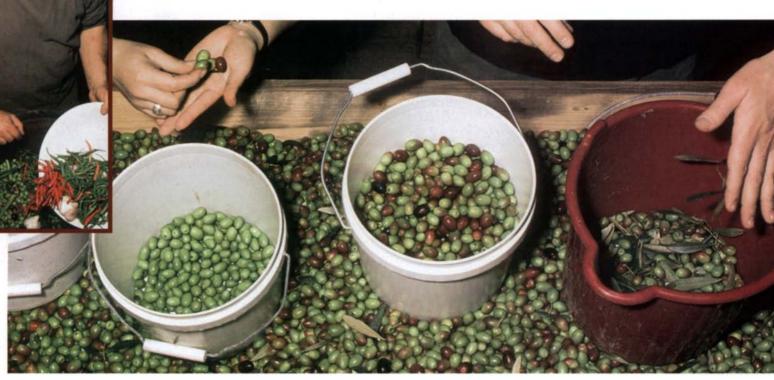
Earl LeClaire, formerly a cook at The Sonoma Hotel and The Mission Inn in northern California, can now be found stirring polenta in the kitchens at El Rancho d'Obispo in Healdsburg, California. ◆

"There's nothing scientific about it," says author Angelo Garro as he adds hot peppers and garlic to a barrel of his olives.

Home-Cured Olives

An Italian living in San Francisco makes his own with just a few simple ingredients and a little help from his friends

BY ANGELO GARRO



Sorting the olives is the first step. Young, hard green olives go into one bucket; others that are larger and speckled with red go into another; and plump, fully mature black olives go into a bucket of their own.

hen I was growing up in Sicily, my family rarely went to the market for food. We grew our own vegetables, made our own wine, and every fall we gathered in my grandmother's kitchen to cure olives. When you grow up with these traditions, they stay with you, and you carry them with you wherever you go. I live in California now and earn my living as an ironsmith, but I still love to prepare the kind of food that I ate as a boy in Italy. I gather mushrooms from the forest, and make fritters from wild fennel that grows alongside the road; I make sausage from boars that I hunt, and wine from local grapes, and on my table there are always olives cured the way my grandmother taught me.

AN OLIVE-CURING PARTY

Every year, usually at the beginning of December, my friends and I spend a weekend curing olives. For a shared harvest, we pick, sort, crack, pierce, and cure sometimes as much as 600 pounds of olives. In fact, I've turned olive-making into an annual party. Not many of my friends in San Francisco grew up with the food traditions that I did, and I have fun introducing them to the things I learned from my grandmother. On Saturday, we drive to a friend's farm near Sacramento and pick olives all day. We always bring along a picnic to eat in the olive grove. The next day, back at my forge in the city, everyone helps sort olives and prepare them for curing. When the work is done, we feast. The point is simply to be







together, to cook, and to have fun. Of course everyone shows up again when the olives are finished curing to claim their share.

At this time of the year, there are olives at every stage of ripeness on the trees—tiny, hard green ones, others just beginning to color and speckled with red, as well as plump, fully mature black olives. Some of the olives take months to cure, but others are ready to eat in just a few weeks.

Before the olives can be cured they must be sorted. We make three piles. The tiny green olives go into one; any olive that shows the slightest bit of color goes into another, and the olives that are completely black go into a third.

Each type of olive requires a different cure. The green ones are cracked and then soaked in fresh water to leach out their bitterness. The colored olives are cured in brine, and the fully mature black olives are salt-cured.

Some people use lye to cure olives, but I don't like the taste. They can wash and wash and wash the olives, but I always taste the lye. Even though it can be used safely, lye is still a poison, and it's hard to feel comfortable putting it in your food. There's no reason to use it. I've cured olives all my life with only water, salt, and seasonings.

GREEN OLIVES ARE CURED IN FRESH WATER

When you have olives and you love olives, you cannot wait to have olives to eat. So I start every olive season by making *olive nueve*, new olives. Made with the smallest and greenest of olives and cured in fresh water, these are ready to eat in just five to six weeks and help satisfy my craving for olives while I wait for the others to cure.

Green olives are rock hard, so to help them release their bitter juices, I smash each one with a rock. (Wear an apron or old clothes when you do this, as you'll be covered with olive oil.) When all the olives



No fancy equipment required. Crush the green olives with a rock, but be sure to cover up: you'll be showered with freshpressed extra-virgin olive oil.

are cracked, I put them in plastic buckets and cover them with cold water. Every day, I drain the olives and cover them with fresh water. As the olives soak, their bitterness is leached out into the water.

Start tasting the olives after they've soaked for four weeks. If they're still too bitter, leave the olives, changing the water every day, and taste again a week later. When the olives are no longer bitter, spread them out on a tablecloth and leave them overnight in a warm kitchen to dry. The next day, put the olives in a big bowl with garlic and mint

Where to find olives if you don't have a tree BY MAGGIE BLYTH KLEIN

The best source for fresh olives is an olive tree. Olives you pick yourself are less likely to be bruised, and you'll be assured that they're absolutely fresh when you start to cure them. A current favorite with landscape designers, olive trees aren't as hard to find as you might think. Anywhere winters are mild, olive trees thrive, provided there are no prolonged severe freezes. And because olives create an oil slick when they drop to the ground, many olive tree owners are happy to let you help yourself to their olives—just be sure

to ask first. In moderate climates, start looking for suitably "ripe" green olives in October, in areas with long, very hot summers, olives will be ready for curing in late September. As the months progress, olives available for curing will go from green to red to black, the black being available as late as January.

Happily, olives are no longer a rarity at produce markets, either.

Toward the end of September, when the oil content of the olive is sufficiently high, Califomia olive growers begin shipping their crop to terminal

markets in Montreal, Toronto,
Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia,
Boston, Denver, and Oakland. From
there, the olives are distributed to
local produce wholesale markets,
where independent grocers and, to
a small extent, supermarkets can buy
them. Specialty markets and independent grocery stores, particularly
those in Italian, Portuguese, Greek,
or Spanish neighborhoods, are good
places to look.

If you can find them, buy Manzanillo olives. They have a high fleshto-pit ratio and tend to cure evenly. Unfortunately, 85% of the fresh olives available from California are the largest commonly grown variety—the Sevillano. These huge olives have a low oil content and less flavor than other varieties, but are nevertheless suitable for curing. Whatever olives you use, be sure they're free of cuts, bruises, and dryness.

Maggie Blyth Klein, a co-owner of Oliveto Restaurant in Oakland, California, is the author of The Feast of the Olive (Chronicle Books, 1994).



Plump black olives are packed into tall Chinese laundry baskets between layers of rock salt. In five weeks, they'll be shriveled, intensely flavored, and ready to eat.

chopped very fine, olive oil, vinegar, and salt to taste. Use two parts olive oil and one part vinegar. The amounts for the other seasonings are strictly to taste. Cover the bowl and let the olives steep, stirring occasionally, for two to three days. Now the olives are ready to eat. Transfer them to large glass jars

and top with a layer of olive oil to preserve them. These green olives should be stored in the refrigerator, but always bring them to room temperature before eating. Don't keep them for more than two months.

A SPICY BRINE FOR "RED" OLIVES

As the olives begin to mature, their color slowly changes from green to black. At this in-between stage the olives are still partly green, speckled with red, and starting to grow plump. I cure these olives in a brine, a process that in Italy we call *olive a la salmoria*.

These olives soak for about six months in a mixture of salted water and herbs. I start by filling a barrel with the olives. To measure the salt, I fill a bucket with water and drop in a whole fresh raw egg. The egg immediately sinks to the bottom, but as I add salt, it starts to float. I add salt until the egg bobs on the surface. Now the water is salty enough to cure the olives. I take out the egg and pour the water into the barrel.

I add fresh hot chiles to the barrel, branches of wild fennel (you can use fennel seeds or the tops of fennel bulbs), and whole heads of garlic. Again, there is no right amount to use, just add the seasonings to taste.

After four months or so I change the water. There's nothing scientific about it; I just look at the calendar and realize that three, maybe four months have passed. I drain the water, leave the seasonings, and repeat the process with fresh water and salt.

The olives cure for another month. Then I drain them again, add fresh brine, and repeat the process one more time. At the end of six months, I drain the olives, but this time I cover them with water that's only slightly salty. These olives can be packed in jars with their brine and seasonings and stored at room temperature. They last as long as a year and a half.

A SALT CURE FOR BLACK OLIVES

On my table, there are

always olives cured the

way my grandmother

taught me.

Black olives are pierced with a fork before they're salted so that their bitter juices can run out. I pack the olives in tall Chinese laundry baskets between layers of rock salt; any tall wicker basket will do. Start with a thick layer of salt on the bottom of the basket, top with a two- to three-inch layer of olives, more salt—two or three generous handfuls—and more olives, repeating until the basket is full. Then top it off with a thick layer of salt. Cover the basket with a board and weight it down with a stone. Be sure to set the basket over a container to catch the juice that drains from the olives. Every week turn the olives and add more salt to replace what melts and runs out with the juice from the olives. You may need to add more salt occasionally to prevent

mold from developing. After five weeks, rinse all the salt from the olives and dry them well.

To season the olives, gently heat about a cup of olive oil in a large frying pan. Add thin slivers of orange peel, a few squeezes of fresh orange juice, some red pepper flakes, a few crushed cloves of garlic, about ½ cup of

red-wine vinegar, and a couple of tablespoons of fennel seeds. Add the olives in batches, toss well, and heat until they are warmed through. Pour the olives into jars and cover with olive oil. Be sure the orange peel is completely submerged; it will spoil if exposed to air. These olives should be stored in the refrigerator but brought to room temperature before serving. If you keep them covered with olive oil, they will keep for two years.

The fires at Angelo Garro's Renaissance Forge are as likely to be boiling a pot of water for pasta as they are welding and shaping iron into art.



Measure salt egg-xactly.

A fresh egg will float in brine that's sufficiently salted.

Making a Rum-Raisin Napoleon

A pastry chef shows how to create silky custard and crisp pastry for her version of this classic dessert

BY LAURANN CLARIDGE



Pastry chef Laurann Claridge uses baked custard instead of pastry cream in her napoleon.



he napoleon is the quintessential French pastry. It's elegant. It's refined. It's gorgeous but not gaudy. More than the looks, however, I love the delectable contrast in each mouthful—creamy, smooth-as-silk custard (spiked with a little rum and raisins in my recipe) against buttery, toasty, crisp pastry.

Over the years I've spent a lot of time developing and improving my own version of this dessert. But you don't need to be an expert to produce a stunning napoleon, which is called *millefeuille* (pronounced MEEL-FOY) in France, meaning "a thousand layers." If you're patient, persistent, and precise (and you follow the directions below), you can turn out a dessert more beautiful and delicious than any you see in a French pastry shop window.



The custard is the heart and soul of a napoleon. Even perfect puff pastry won't mean a thing without a smooth and creamy custard between the layers. Traditional napoleons are made with pastry cream (*crème pâtissière*), a custard thickened with flour or cornstarch, but I've always found pastry cream to be, well, pasty. I was lucky enough to taste a napoleon made by Los Angeles chef Michel

Richard in which he used a baked custard instead of pastry cream. It was a brilliant substitution, which I've adopted.

The baked custard is actually simpler to make, easier to work with, and most importantly, more wonderful to eat—smooth, satiny, not the least bit heavy.

Egg yolks give structure to the custard. The custard is simple, but it helps to understand the interaction among its three crucial components—eggs, milk or cream, and sugar.

Eggs are crucial for setting a custard, and here they are the sole thickener; the absence of flour or cornstarch is one of the reasons the custard is so velvety. Whole eggs will give you a slightly lower-fat custard, but the whites tend to make the texture firmer, more gelatinous. I use only yolks, two or three per cup, and I use mostly cream with a little milk for lightness (see recipe on p. 72). For the richest custard, use three yolks per cup and all cream—no milk.

Sugar is the least critical component in this custard, and you can adjust the amount to suit your taste. When whisking sugar and eggs, whisk immediately and vigorously. If sugar and eggs are left in contact for more than a minute or so, the sugar will "burn" the yolks, making little lumps that will never blend into the finished custard.



The custard is baked in a water bath to keep the heat gentle and even. A covering of foil helps prevent a thick skin from forming on the surface.

Making the détrempe—the basic dough

Rub in the butter. Sift flour and salt onto a cool, dry surface. Rub butter into the flour until you have a scattering of flakes the size of oatmeal. Make a well and mix the ingredients. Shape the flakes into a well, pour water and lemon juice into the center, and rotate your fingers to draw in the flour, making a wet paste. Drag in the rest of the flour to make a ragged dough.





The trick to puff pastry

is to go slowly

and pace the process.



Controlling the heat for a smooth texture. To

produce the smoothest custard, you need to bake the it in a water bath (also called a *bain marie*) to keep the heat gentle and steady (see photo opposite). Cover the water bath snugly with aluminum foil to trap the steam; this will prevent a thick skin from forming on top of the custard. Don't bake the custard in a metal or foil pan, since metal will con-

duct the oven's heat too directly to the custard. I use Pyrex or ceramic pans.

Once the custard is baked, it needs a long cooling time—first at room temperature and then in the refrigerator for another few hours or preferably overnight—to be firm

enough to transfer in strips to the finished pastry. (See custard recipe on pp. 72–73.)

MASTER PUFF PASTRY BY GIVING IT A REST

The custard for this napoleon is easy to make, and the puff pastry can be easy, too, despite its reputation as one of the most challenging pastries to master. The most common problem for beginners is that they develop too much gluten in the flour-and water-part of the dough—called the détrempe (pro-

nounced day-TRAHMP)—which makes the pastry dough very stretchy and hard to roll out. The trick is to go slowly and to pace the process so that you allow plenty of chilling and resting time in between each stage. In fact, you'll have better success if you spread the process out over a couple of days.

Not plain pie dough. A classic puff pastry recipe calls for equal weights of flour and butter, which is

about twice the amount of butter in a regular pie crust. This large amount of fat is carefully combined with the other ingredients in a process known as "turning," which creates hundreds of sheets of flour-and-water dough sandwiched between thin layers of

butter. The butter lubricates the layers, keeping each distinct and separate. During baking, the moisture in the dough turns to steam, which pushes the layers upward, resulting in a delicate, crisp, buttery pastry.

A blend of flour gives just enough strength. I recommend combining equal portions of unbleached all-purpose flour and cake or pastry flour. This half-and-half mixture gives the dough just enough gluten to make layers that will stay intact

Blend the dough.

Smear the dough with your palm to form a rough ball. If the dough is too dry to hold together, add up to 1/3 cup more ice water, 1 tablespoon at a time. Work until the dough forms a slightly soft and sticky ball. Score the top in a crisscross pattern (see photo opposite) Wrap in plastic and again in foil. Chill 4 to 12 hours.

Wrapping the butter

Shape the butter.
Sprinkle the work
surface with ½ cup
flour and arrange the
butter sticks into a
block. Pound to form
a pliable mass; add
more flour if it gets too
sticky. Shape into a
5-inch square.



Place the butter.
Roll the détrempe into a ½-inch-thick slab about 10 inches square, with the edges slightly thinner than the center. Set the butter square in the center.





Wrap the butter. Bring both sides of the dough inward and then the top and bottom together. Seal the seams carefully by pinching. Refrigerate for 10 minutes.

during all the rolling and turning and during baking, despite the pressure of the steam.

Good butter makes a difference. Use unsalted butter for the best flavor. Unfortunately, all butter contains moisture (though the better the quality, the lower the moisture content), which can increase gluten formation and toughen the dough. To alleviate any problems with excess moisture, I knead a little flour into my butter while I soften it. The flour absorbs the water but doesn't form much gluten because it's surrounded by so much fat, which "shortens" or interferes with gluten formation.

Cold water and acid cut down on gluten. I use spring water because I don't want to risk any off flavors from tap water, and I chill it until it's very cold, which will help minimize gluten development.

I also add a little lemon juice to the *détrempe*, which lowers the pH of the dough and conditions and relaxes the gluten strands, making the dough easier to roll and turn. You can also use cream of tartar or cider vinegar.

Puff pastry is made in three basic steps:

- making the détrempe (the basic flour-and-water dough);
- softening the butter and wrapping it in the détrempe;
- rolling and turning; this step is done six times.

I'm a traditionalist, and I prefer making the détrempe by hand (see photos on p. 69). I find that working the dough by hand has a wonderful therapeutic effect. While the détrempe is mainly flour and water, a small amount of butter is worked in to help keep too much gluten from forming. You want the détrempe to be strong and stretchy enough to withstand lots of rolling and folding, but if it's too stretchy, it will shrink back as you roll, and you'll never manage the six turns.

The key to the right détrempe texture is to let it relax for at least four hours and up to 12 hours in the refrigerator until it reaches its ideal texture—smooth and supple. In fact, your goal is to give the détrempe the same texture as your butter has at room temperature. When both components have the same texture, they'll behave the same way under the rolling pin, forming even sheets of dough and butter.

I give the butter the right texture through a combination of letting it warm up to room temperature and pounding it and a little flour with the rolling pin until it's very malleable, like modeling clay (see photo at top left).

The actual rolling of the *détrempe* and butter takes patience. The rolling itself takes much less time than the periods of rest and chilling between each turn, but again, these chilling periods are key to a dough that's easy to work, maintains its shape during baking, and has a tender, flaky finished texture. (See photos opposite.)

Rolling and turning

Roll dough out slowly, bearing down on the pin, with firm, even strokes untilyou have an 8x16-inch rectangle.

Fold the dough in thirds, like a letter, keeping the inside edge flush against the inside fold. If necessary, pull the corners slightly to make an even rectangle.







The recipe I'm providing makes about twice the amount of pastry you'll need for one napoleon to serve four to six people; it's difficult to make a dough in a smaller quantity than this. For the very best results, I like to bake the pastry within six hours of its final turn, but you can wrap it carefully and refrigerate it for three days or freeze for three months.

TURNING PUFF PASTRY DOUGH INTO A CLASSIC NAPOLEON

Just as patience is the key to making a good puff pastry dough, precision is the key to transforming the dough into a perfect napoleon. This is a classic dessert, and while flavor is its highest virtue, a trim, perfectly proportioned appearance is another important part of its appeal.

Don't let your puff pastry puff. Though puff pastry can rise very high, for a napoleon, you need to do all you can to keep the pastry flat. This seems paradoxical, since you've taken so much care to make a dough with hundreds of layers, but a good napoleon is made of sheets of pastry that are almost wafer-thin. Don't worry, the individual layers will still separate during cooking to produce a crisp, flaky pastry, but the flakes will be close together, not puffed apart.

You get this ideal texture by:

- ◆ rolling the dough until it's very thin, about 1/16 inch;
- pricking the entire surface of the dough with a fork, which will let some steam escape during cooking; and
- ◆ laying a rack on the dough during baking, which weights the dough down and prevents it from twisting or rising in isolated pockets.





Rotate the dough 90°, so the fold is on your left and the flap opens like a book. This rolling, folding, and rotating 90° is called a "turn." Repeat once more. Wrap the dough block in plastic and chill 45 min.

Continue for two more sets of two turns (a total of six turns), chilling 1½ hours between the two sets. If the dough starts to get too soft and sticky, stop what you're doing, wrap it, and chill it for a few minutes.

Keep track of your turns by lightly indenting the dough with your fingerprint. Keep the dough wrapped and chilled until you're ready to use it.

Making the napoleon layers

Roll the pastry sheet. Heat the oven to 400°F. Sprinkle the back of a baking sheet with water. Cut the dough in half and roll half on a lightly floured surface into a ½6-inchthick sheet about 16x13 inches. Transfer to the baking sheet using your rolling pin.



Prepare the pastry for baking. Prick the pastry evenly and generously all over. Chill the dough at least 30 minutes. Lay an ungreased rectangular cake rack directly on the chilled dough.



Bake in the hot oven for 10 to 15 minutes (the pastry will start forming steam inside). Reduce heat to 350° and bake until the pastry is deep golden brown, about 25 more minutes. Remove the rack, reduce the heat to 300°, and bake for 5 more minutes to dry out the inner layers.



Cool and cut the pastry. Carefully transfer the pastry to a cooling rack. When completely cool, lay the pastry on a flat surface. Use a ruler and knife to measure and cut three $3\frac{1}{2}x11$ -inch strips.

Classic Puff Pastry Dough

This recipe makes enough for two napoleons. Wrap any leftover raw dough in plastic and freeze.

FOR THE DETREMPE:

8 oz. (about 2 cups) cake flour 8 oz. (about 1³4 cups) unbleached all-purpose flour 1 tsp. salt (or a scant 2 tsp. kosher salt) 2 oz. (4 Tbs.) unsalted butter, chilled, cut into ¹/4-inch pieces 1 cup spring water, ice cold; more as needed 1 Tbs. lemon juice

FOR THE BUTTER PACKAGE:

14 oz. (3½ sticks) unsalted butter, chilled and then softened at room temperature 10 min. before use ½ cup all-purpose flour

More flour to dust surfaces

Follow the instructions in the photos starting on p. 69.

Rum-Raisin Custard

Yields enough filling for one napoleon.

½ cup dark or golden raisins or a combination ¼ cup dark spiced rum (such as Captain Morgan's) 2 cups heavy cream ½ cup whole milk ¼ vanilla bean (or 2 tsp. vanilla extract) 5 large egg yolks ½ cup sugar

You naturally need to guard against burning your pastry, but underbaking is almost as serious a sin as overbaking, especially when it comes to puff pastry. The main problem with underbaked puff pastry is that, though the outer layers look golden brown and crisp, the inner layers may still be slightly leathery, not yet crisp. This makes the sheet of pastry impossible to cut and not so nice to chew. The other advantage of proper baking is flavor—only in the final stages of baking do the sugars and proteins in the ingredients fully caramelize, which gives the pastry a deep, nutty flavor.

Measure twice, cut once. The three layers of pastry that make up the napoleon must be exactly the same size in order to look good, and the pastry and custard should meet on all sides, forming a smooth edge of alternating textures and colors. To do this, you need to use a ruler and measure both your pastry and custard exactly before cutting. To cut the custard, use a regular paring knife. To cut the pastry, use a serrated knife and very short, gentle sawing strokes. Once you've assembled the napoleon, you should serve it within an hour so the pastry doesn't get soggy. You can actually put it together right before you're ready to serve if you have your custard chilled and sliced and your pastry strips cut (see photos opposite). The final assembly of this fantastic dessert won't take more than five minutes.



Begin the assembly.
Cut the custard into two 3½x11-inch strips; cut each strip in half.
(Reserve remaining custard for patches.)
Put the first layer of pastry on a flat board.
With a long, wide, offset spatula, lift a quarter of the custard and set it on the pastry. Repeat with second quarter to fill the first layer.



Finish layering. Add a second layer of pastry and custard. Top with the third layer of pastry, smooth side up.
Smooth any roughedges of custard.

Heat the oven to 300°F.

Boil the raisins and rum in a small saucepan over medium heat until 1 Tbs. of the liquid is left; cool.

Bring the heavy cream and milk to a simmer in a medium-sized heavy saucepan over medium heat. Split and scrape the vanilla bean, if using; add the seeds and the pod to the cream. Meanwhile, with an electric mixer, beat the egg yolks with the sugar until the mixture is thick and light yellow and the sugar granules are almost completely dissolved.

When the cream has reached a boil, let it cool a moment and then slowly pour it over the egg mixture, slowly whisking it in. Pour the custard through a fine mesh strainer into a stainless-steel bowl. Add the raisins, the reduced rum, and the vanilla extract, if using.

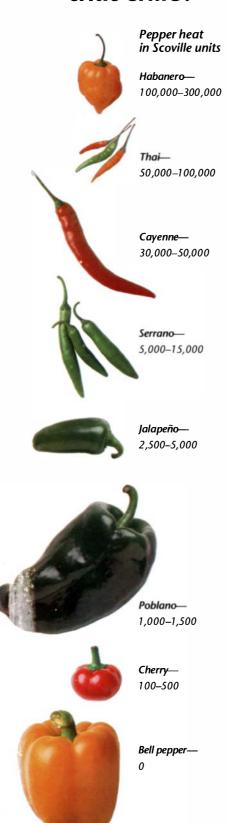
Pour the custard into a 9x13-inch Pyrex or ceramic baking dish (never metal). Set that dish in a larger and slightly deeper roasting pan. Fill the roasting pan with hot water until it reaches halfway up the sides of the smaller baking dish. Cover with foil. Bake the custard on the center rack for 70 to 80 min., or until a knife inserted into the custard comes out clean. Remove the pan from the water bath, let it cool to room temperature, and then refrigerate several hours or overnight.

Laurann Claridge studied pastry in France at Ecole Lenôtre and La Varenne. Her program, "Food Talk," is broadcast on Saturdays from KPRC in Houston. ◆



Cut and decorate the slices. Gingerly brace the pastry with one hand and with the other, slowly draw a long serrated knife back and forth, through one layer of pastry at a time. Sprinkle the top with a thick layer of confectioners' sugar.

How hot is that chile?



f you like to cook with chile peppers—and so many people do these days, given the popularity of such spicy cuisines as Mexican, Asian, and Caribbean—you've probably heard of the Scoville scale. Chile aficionados will brag that their favorite chiles are the hottest, with a scorching 300,000 on the Scoville scale, while that jalapeño you've just learned to love only measures a wimpy 4,000. But what exactly do these

added before the chile's heat became imperceptible.

Scoville's test was used for the next six decades, yet it wasn't totally reliable, given the fact that human testers' palates are different and easily fatigued by repeated tastings of hot food. In 1980, a more objective test was introduced, the High-Pressure Liquid Chromatography Test, in which powdered chiles are dissolved and then analyzed through a light beam that

you up front on the lips and tip of the tongue, while others scorch your entire mouth and throat. Even the researchers themselves will admit that for all their accuracy, the pepper is a fickle plant: its heat varies widely from pod to pod, plant to plant, garden to garden, and season to season. Even on a single bush, a pod from the sunnier side will be hotter than one from the shady side. A quick look at a sample Scoville scale (left) shows the wide variances within each type of chile.

The Scoville rating provides a good general measure of the relative heat of different chiles. In other words, you can be assured that a cayenne will be hotter than a poblano. But ultimately, taste remains a subjective experience. There's no substitute for breaking open a chile and tasting it yourself (carefully) for flavor and, of course, for firepower.

A habanero delivers sharp, quick bursts of heat, while the fiery red Thai pepper burns and lingers.

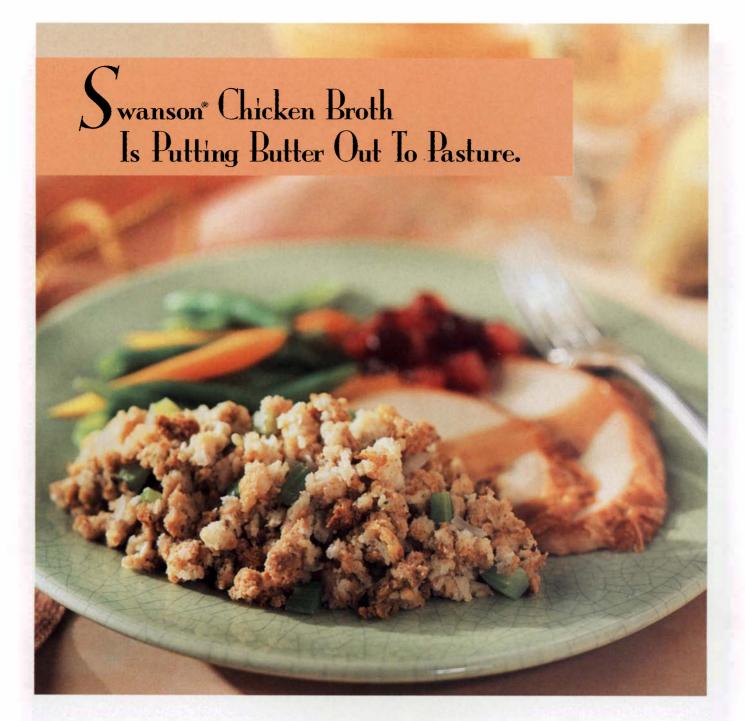
numbers mean, and how do they translate into useful information?

Scoville took the guesswork out of judging chiles. Let's start with the invention of the Scoville scale, and then we'll look at how different varieties of chiles rank in this heat hierarchy. In 1912, a man named Wilbur L. Scoville was working for a company that made an ointment for aching joints in which capsaicin, the heat-causing compound in chiles, was an important ingredient. The company was constantly frustrated because the heat level in chiles varied so much. Scoville devised a formal test in which exact weights of chiles were dissolved in alcohol and then added to sweetened water in precise measures. Tasters were asked to determine how much water was needed to neutralize the heat. A rating number was assigned, according to how many units of water were shows the heat compounds as fluorescent. Most large producers use this test today, but because the Scoville name has been so deeply ingrained in the industry, they make a conversion and still express the pungency in Scoville units.

The Scoville scale ranks fire but not flavor. So what does any of this have to do with the flavor of chiles? Not much. These tests isolate only the heat-causing compounds, but tell us nothing about the overall flavor. The heat of a chile is found in the inner membrane, while the flavor comes from the meaty pod itself and makes all the difference in how we experience the heat. These tests also do nothing to discern how the heat is felt. As anyone who has eaten a lot of chiles will tell you, some, such as the habanero, deliver sharp, quick bursts of heat, while others, such as the fiery red Thai pepper, burn and linger. Some hit

Great grains with the pilaf method

Grains have become a regular feature in my weekly menus, not only because they're nutritional gold mines and easy to cook, but also because I love the way they taste. But plain rice can get boring, and if you're experimenting with grains, such as bulgur or barley, you want to choose a cooking method that's sure to convert any skeptical appetites in your house. In the pilaf method, grains are lightly toasted in oil or butter with vegetables and seasoning



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1 can (14½ ounces) Swanson® Chicken Broth generous dash of pepper 1 stalk of celery, coarsely chopped (about ½ cup)

1 stalk of cetery, coarsely chopped (about 1/2 cup) 1 small onion, coarsely chopped (1/4 cup) 4 cups Pepperidge Farm® Herb Seasoned Stuffing

- In a medium saucepan mix broth, pepper, celery and onion. Over high heat, heat to a boil. Reduce heat to low. Cover and cook 5 minutes or until vegetables are tender.
- 2. Add stuffing. Mix lightly. Serves 5.



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A quick sauté seals each grain of rice, resulting in a less sticky finished texture. Flavoring ingredients are cooked at this stage, too.

before they're simmered in stock or water. The result is fluffier, less sticky grains with a tremendous flavor advantage.

While pilaf is most often associated with long-grain white rice, any grain cooks beautifully this way. Bulgur, wild rice, brown rice, barley, and quinoa are some of my favorites. I sometimes mix two grains with like cooking times—brown rice and barley, for example.

Add flavor to pilafs with stock and lots of aromatics.

The first step toward a pilaf is a quick rinse right before cooking to remove any chaff and to eliminate excess starch for a less sticky cooked dish. Next, heat up the stock or water; you can use either, but stock will give you more flavor. I particularly like to use a lively vegetable stock. since it's quick to make from scratch and full of bright flavors that will be absorbed by the grain. Richer stocks, such as veal or poultry, match well with hearty grains. If you don't have homemade stock or a

good ready-made substitute, just use generous amounts of onions, carrots, and other aromatic vegetables in the first stage of cooking.

Choose a heavy-based pan with a tight-fitting lid. Heat 1 to 2 tablespoons oil over moderate heat. Use a neutral oil with a relatively high smoking point, like canola. You can use olive oil if you want a little more flavor. Butter works, but be careful not to let it burn. I sometimes

With the pilaf method, grains are lightly toasted in oil or butter before they're simmered.

use clarified butter, which has a higher smoking point.

When the oil is hot, add some chopped aromatic vegetables. The minimum would be shallots or onions, and a little garlic, but lots of other ingredients seem to find their way into my pilafs—bacon, bell peppers, carrots, fennel, and celery are favorites. Herbs and spices are delicious additions, too, such as bay leaf, thyme, sage, cumin, ginger, and fresh or dried chiles. Fragile herbs, such as basil, dill, parsley, should be added at the end of cooking so they



A perfect pilar is tender, fluffy rice with loads of flavor.

don't wilt and lose their fresh flavor. The amount of aromatics you use is up to you—the more you use, the greater the proportion of vegetable to grain in the finished dish.

Sautéing in oil gives the grain the right texture. When the vegetables have softened slightly (5 to 10 minutes), add the grain, stirring to coat evenly with the oil. Let it cook for 3 to 4 minutes, a step known as rissolé. The grains will start to change color slightly and may make popping sounds. At this point, add the hot stock all at once. Most grains absorb twice their volume in water, so add 2 cups of stock for every cup of grain. Stir briefly to make sure nothing is stuck to the bottom of the pan. Bring to a boil and then immediately reduce to a simmer and cover tightly. If the lid is loose, try covering the pot with aluminum foil and then the lid.

To complete the cooking, you can let the pan simmer gently on the back burner or slip it into a 350°F oven. Cook until all the liquid is absorbed and the grains are soft. I tend to serve rice and other grains slightly *aldente*, but you may prefer a softer texture. Most pilafs take 20 to 40 minutes to cook. If the liquid has been absorbed before the grain is done, simply add a bit more hot water or stock and continue cooking.

When done, remove from the heat, fluff with a fork, and adjust the seasonings with salt, freshly ground pepper, and some fresh herbs. I like to enrich pilafs at the end with raisins or other dried fruit, toasted nuts, chopped scallions, sautéed mushrooms, or green peas, depending on the flavors I'm after. Let the pilaf sit covered for 5 minutes to absorb the last-minute seasonings and to fluff up nicely.

Getting all the grit out of leeks

I developed a real taste for leeks when I lived in France, and they have since become an essential ingredient in my soups, stocks, and braises. I'm also very fond of them as vegetables in their own right, steamed and served warm or cold, sometimes bathed in a vinaigrette. The white bottom end of the leek is the part we value for its mild onion flavor, though the green tops can be used in stocks as well. The way the white part gets white and tender is by being buried in dirt as it grows. While this keeps the flavor and color delicate, it makes cleaning a chore. The tightly

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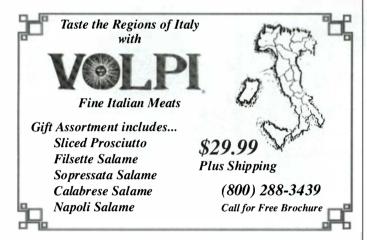


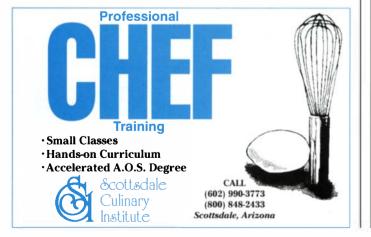
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BASICS

wrapped leaves hold an impressive amount of gritty dirt that will ruin any dish if not carefully washed away.

Get inside the leek to get at the grit. Buy leeks that are bright and firm without any discoloration or slime. Fresh leeks will last about one week wrapped in plastic in the refrigerator. Start by trimming off the shaggy root end. Don't trim away any of the white or the leek will fall apart. Then peel off any wilted or dry outer leaves and cut off the top part of the green end where it turns darker and tougher. You'll end up with 5 to 8 inches of vegetable, mostly white with some pale green.

Set the leek on a cutting board and, with the point of a sharp knife, split it lengthwise, starting about an inch from the base. For fat leeks, turn and slice again, splitting them into quarters. When all the leeks are sliced open, fill a basin with cold water and dunk the leeks, green end first, in the water. Use your free hand to fan out the layers

Leeks hold an impressive amount of dirt that will ruin any dish if not carefully washed away.

and agitate the leeks to remove the dirt. If you have the time, let the leeks soak in the water for around 15 minutes first to help loosen the dirt.

If you're going to chop or

slice the leeks for a recipe, go ahead and cut them before washing. Then throw the chopped leeks into a basin of cold water, swish them around, and lift them out (using your hands or a strainer), leaving the dirt in the bottom of the basin. Always remember to wipe off your cutting boards



Slit whole leeks to find the hidden dirt. Soak them and then fan the layers so each gets rinsed.



For chopped leeks, cut first, wash second. Lift the clean leeks, leaving arit behind.

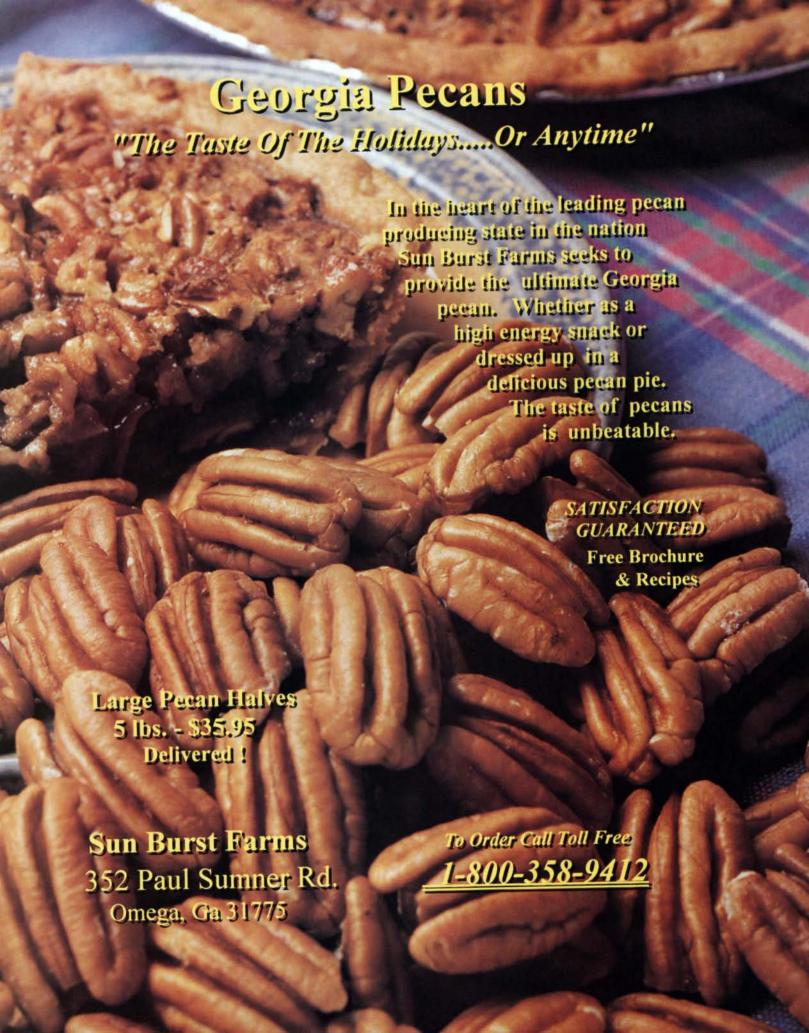
after trimming and slicing unwashed leeks or you'll end up with dirt in your recipe even though the leeks themselves are pristine.

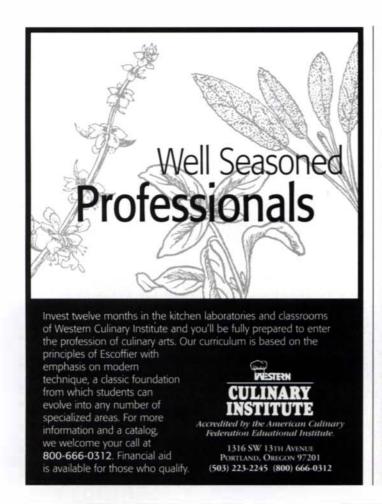
—Molly Stevens, a contributing editor to Fine Cooking, is a chef/instructor at the New England Culinary Institute in Essex, Vermont. ◆













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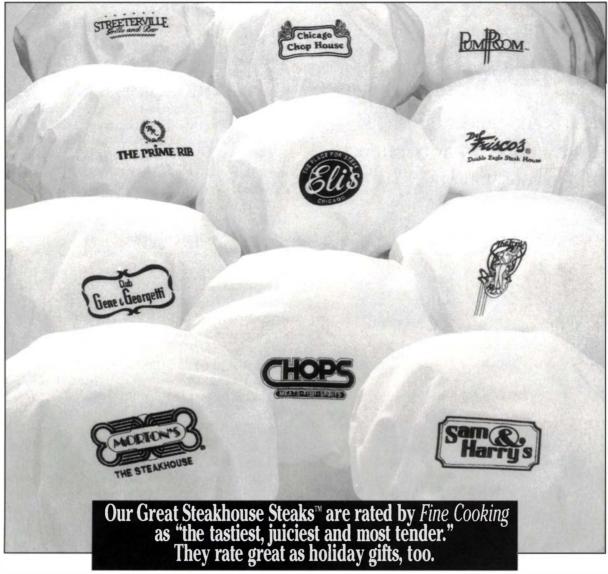
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BY SHIRLEY O. CORRIHER



Whether or not a scone is light and flaky, a baguette crusty, or pasta pleasingly al dente depends a great deal on the flour that was used to make it. The finished texture of anything made with flour relies largely on the gluten-forming proteins in that flour. When you add water to flour, these proteins—glutenin and gliadin—join with each other and with water to form strong elastic sheets of gluten. A lot of highly developed gluten in a dough produces a sturdy bread, pasta, or pastry, while a dough or batter with little gluten makes tender baked goods.

You can't judge a flour by its appearance—its protein content is the key to how it will perform in baking.

SAME WHEAT, MANY STRENGTHS OF FLOUR

Many grains can be ground into flour, but only wheat has significant quantities of glutenin and gliadin. Different types of wheat have different amounts of these proteins. Soft winter wheat has much less glutenin and gliadin than hard spring wheat.

Flour made from the same wheat can also be very different. Proteins are found in the layers just underneath the wheat kernel's husk. The center portion of the kernel is

starch. Germ and bran are also present. Wheat kernels are ground between rollers that separate a thin outside layer; the kernels drop to other sets of rollers, where they're ground again, and the grindings, or streams, may be even further separated.

A kernel of wheat may be separated into 80 or more streams. The earlier streams from near the outside of the kernel will be high in glutenin and gliadin, while the later streams will be starch. Every stream is analyzed so the miller knows exactly what is in it.

THE CHOICE OF FLOURS ON THE MARKET

Just as winemakers blend juices from different vineyards, millers blend flours from different streams of wheat to make flours for specific uses.

Whole-wheat flour contains germ and bran. Per cup, whole-wheat flour will have fewer gluten-forming proteins than other flour from the same wheat just because it contains these other parts of the kernel. (The protein varies too widely to give a specific quantity). Also, whole-wheat flour has many different proteins from the germ; the actual protein content doesn't indicate the potential for gluten formation. Whole-wheat flour makes heavier bread. It's often combined with high-protein white flour for a lighter loaf.

White whole-wheat flour is made from a strain of high-protein wheat that, even with the bran and germ included, produces white flour. The protein content is lower than that of bread flour because of the bran and germ content, but higher than ordinary whole-wheat flour.

Durum wheat, whose flour is also called semolina, is moderately high-protein (over 13g per cup) and has a very hard kernel that has its starch encased in protein. This keeps products like pasta from becoming a starchy mess when slightly overcooked. Commercial pasta is made of very fine semolina, but the semolina that U.S. consumers can buy is usually very coarse. When using Italian recipes, look for "pasta" flour made from durum wheat or semolina flour.

Cake flour is low in protein (8g per cup) and very finely ground to make tender, finetextured cakes. Cake flour is bleached with chlorine gas which, besides whitening the flour, also makes it slightly acidic. The acidity makes cakes set faster and have a finer texture. In shortened cakes, droplets of fat contain lots of tiny air bubbles, which give the cake its light texture. These fat droplets stick to the chlorinated starch, which means better distribution of the bubbles and consequently a finer texture. Chlorinated flour also absorbs liquid faster than nonchlorinated.

Pastry flour is also a low-protein flour, but it is not chlorinated.

All-purpose flour can be almost anything: millers can blend flours with any protein content they want and call it all-purpose. Southern mills, such as White Lily and Martha White, traditionally process low-protein soft winter wheat flours (9g per cup). Northern mills, Hecker's and King Arthur for example, process high-protein hard spring wheats (12 to 13g per cup). National millers produce a flour intermediate in protein content

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FOOD SCIENCE

(10 to 12g per cup). The protein content runs from almost as low as that of cake flour to as high as that of bread flour.

Self-rising is a moderate- to low-protein flour (8 to 10g per cup) that includes chemical leavens such as baking powder, usually 1 to 1½ teaspoons per cup of flour. Self-rising flour is used for biscuits, muffins, and quick breads.

Bread flour, a high-protein flour (14g per cup) is ideal for yeast doughs. It's often bromated or has other oxidizers to produce lighter breads.

Wondra® and sauce and gravy flours are low-protein wheat and malted-barley flour mixtures (4 to 6g per cup) that have been cooked to swell the

starch. When added to hot liquids, these flours won't form lumps and are excellent for thickening sauces. Since they are low in protein, they can be used as a pastry flour.

Bleached, unbleached, bromated. Many types of flour can be bleached and conditioned. Freshly milled flour makes sticky dough and poorquality baked goods. As flour is exposed to the air, oxygen combines with yellowish pigments and "bleaches" them. Oxygen also oxidizes sulfur compounds that interfere with a dough's elasticity. Millers use bleaches and oxidants to speed up this natural oxidizing process. Some of these compounds only lighten the color:

some, such as potassium bromate, improve dough quality only; and some do both.

Unbleached flour hasn't been treated to remove color, but may contain oxidizers or dough conditioners. It is usually higher in protein than bleached flour. The package should state "bleached" or "unbleached." If the oxidizer used is potassium bromate, the flour is called brominated (or bromated) flour.

WHICH FLOUR TO USE?

When is a high-protein flour that makes a lot of gluten an advantage, and when is it a handicap? In general, you want gluten in yeast breads and in any dough that needs strength, such as for strudel or pasta. You don't want gluten when your dough is leavened with baking powder or baking soda or when you want a tender pastry like a pie crust.

As yeast in dough ferments, it releases carbondioxide gas into the bubbles and inflates them gently. Gluten holds these bubbles in a network. Without enough gluten, these bubbles would pop, and your bread would be dense and heavy.

Chemical leavens need just the opposite kind of dough. Heavy elastic networks of gluten hold down chemical leavens and make them less effective.

Some steam-leavened products, like génoise, should be tender and need low-protein flour. Others are dependent on elastic sheets of gluten to hold the steam and leaven them: therefore, they need a highprotein flour. Puff pastry is solely dependent on hundreds of paper-thin layers of dough that puff and separate when steam is created during baking. These layers must be strong to hold the steam long enough to puff apart. Strudel dough is also extremely thin and delicate when baked, but that's only because it has enough elastic gluten so that the dough can be stretched until it's as thin as tissue.

Choux pastry and Yorkshire pudding are leavened by eggs and by steam that forms during baking. A relatively high-protein flour makes the dough strong enough to contain the steam while it pushes the pastry to its full height and volume.

Shirley O. Corriher, of Atlanta, Georgia, teaches food science and cooking classes across the country. She is a contributing editor to Fine Cooking.



High-protein flour readily absorbs water. Here, a measured amount of bread flour and water form a ball of dough.



Low-protein flour can't absorb much water. The same measurement of cake flour and water makes a soupy mix instead of a ball.

HOW TO TEST FLOUR FOR GLUTEN-FORMING PROTEIN CONTENT

If you're curious about the gluten-forming protein content of a flour you're using—especially all-purpose, in which the protein content can vary widely—try this simple test.

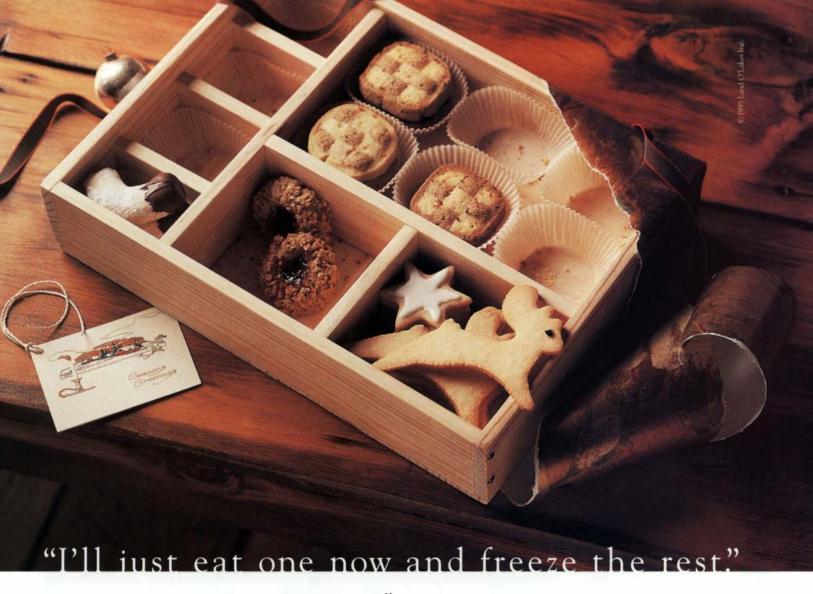
First, create a standard measurement: use 2 cups flour and 1 cup water. Measure the flour by scooping the measuring cup into the bag, filling it, and leveling it off. Put the flour in a food processor and add exactly 1 cup water. Process for 30 seconds.

Do this first with bread flour, which usually has around 14g protein per cup. The dough will come together in a sticky ball. Remove the dough and repeat using cake flour, which is low in protein, around 8g per cup. This dough remains soupy. To

get a dough close to the consistency of the breadflour dough, you'll have to add about $\frac{1}{2}$ cup more cake flour.

Now try this test using the "mystery" flour. A sticky ball of dough means you're close to 14g per cup. A wet dough that needs around ¼ cup more flour to make a sticky ball indicates flour with about 12g protein per cup. A really wet dough, like the dough from cake flour, means you have the equivalent of a southern low-protein flour or a cake flour with 8 to 9g protein per cup. With a little practice, you can become very good at estimating the gluten-forming protein content of a flour, and consequently its best use.

84 FINE COOKING



Something you'll never hear when you bake with the butter people have trusted since 1921.



Wine Wisdom Uncorked

Five books that could change your knowledge of wine overnight

BY KAREN MACNEIL

At a dinner party given by a chef, I overheard a guest ask her about the wine she'd just poured. The chef shrugged her shoulders helplessly and said, "Don't ask me, I'm a food person." A food person? Isn't it curious that people who love food and wine nonetheless characterize themselves as knowing about one or the other, but rarely both?

I've always believed that flavor is flavor—regardless of whether it's solid or liquid. Moreover, anyone who concentrates on flavor as much as a good cook does automatically understands a thing or two about wine. Still, many of us feel far less secure in our wine knowledge than our food knowledge. One reason is quite simple: we don't read about wine.

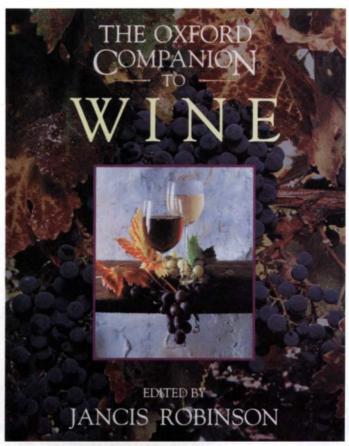
Think of all those times you've taken a cookbook to bed and in ten minutes discovered the secrets of risotto, or while waiting at the supermarket checkout, you picked up a magazine and learned how to use Asian spices. The same process is true for wine. Knowledge comes easiest by reading a paragraph on Beaujolais here, an article on Zinfandel there.

With that in mind, here are some of the best books for learning about wine, even if you're starting at ground zero. Some of these books have been published recently; others are older. What they share is their ability to make understanding wine effortless. Open them anywhere.

The Oxford Companion to Wine, edited by Jancis Robinson. This is the one wine book I'd take to the proverbial desert island. Arranged alphabetically like a dictionary, the Companion includes 3,000 entries, but the explanations and

The Companion is the one wine book I'd take to the proverbial desert island.

definitions are far more than cursory one-liners. Robinson, possibly the world's most famous wine writer and a painstaking researcher, always starts out simply but then takes the reader by the hand and gets into the meaty issues.



The Companion includes short, whimsical entries as well as long, thorough essays on all the major wine regions.

In her eight dense pages on Italy, for example, one learns that vines are cultivated in every region of the country, that sangiovese (the grape that makes Chianti) is the most widely planted variety of some 2,000 different types, and that until a few decades ago, vines in central Italy were still planted between olive groves and rows of grain and were trained up trees so that wild animals didn't eat the grapes.

The Companion has short, whimsical entries: "KANGA-ROOS: can occasionally cause real damage to young vine-yards in Australia," and long, thorough essays on California, Bordeaux, and all the other major wine regions.

Finally, when it comes to those endlessly murky and baffling terms, such as acidity, barrel fermentation, tannin,

and so on, the Companion is exemplary: there's no winespeak, no definitions that themselves require definitions. yet no oversimplification either. Robinson clearly respects and anticipates the "yes, but what about...?" reaction in her readers. Robinson, who wrote much of the text herself, was aided by 82 other wine experts and specialists in various fields. The Companion is a book any wine lover could go back to hundreds of times and learn something new every time.

The World Atlas of Wine, Fourth Edition, by Hugh Johnson. Twenty years ago (when I was writing only about cooking and food), a friend gave me Hugh Johnson's first World Atlas of Wine (1977). It changed the course of my career. Back then, I thought a Barolo was

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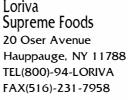






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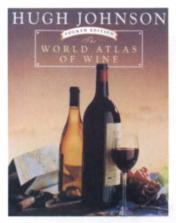




REVIEWS

some kind of Mexican tie. I could never keep Meursault and Montrachet straight, and as far as I knew, red wines were aged and white wines were not because...well, just because.

The Atlas was my tutor and confidant. Over and over, I looked up what I was too embarrassed to actually ask any-

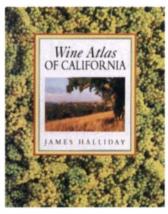


Packed full of illustrations, the Atlas is a great quide for beginners.

one. One of the best things about the *Atlas* is that it's lavishly illustrated. The fourth edition has 185 maps, plus graphs, diagrams, drawings, photographs, and reproductions of labels. As anyone who has ever visited a wine region knows, you sometimes have to see a thing to understand it.

The Atlas is organized by country, yet some of the best chapters are those that deal with fundamental issues. After reading "Choice of a Grape," for example, the differences between Zinfandel, Pinot Noir, and Cabernet seem almost as apparent as those between steak, pork, and chicken.

The Wine Atlas of California, by James Halliday. Less than a decade ago, endless tastings in New York, London, Paris, and San Francisco pitted Cali-



A beautiful book that's a must for anyone visiting California's wine country.

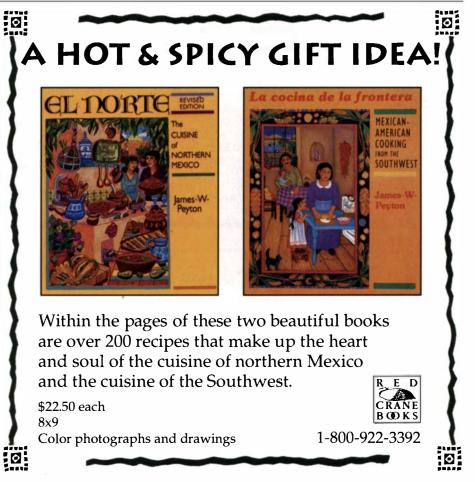
fornia wines against the European elite. The purpose was to see if California wines were wannabes or indeed world-class wines. Those tastings don't happen anymore. California is now acknowledged as one of a handful of the truly great wine-producing

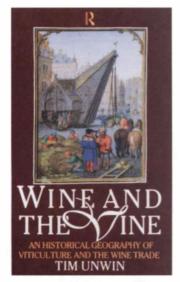
regions...which makes the Wine Atlas of California even more compelling.

The book begins with the prestigious Napa Valley, winds its way through every wine region, and ends with the South Central Coast, considered one of the best "undiscovered" wine regions in the state. Virtually every important winery is profiled, and the photography is drop-dead gorgeous. This book belongs on every American food and wine lover's coffee table, and it's indispensable if you're planning a trip to the California wine country.

Wine and The Vine: An Historical Geography of Viticulture and the Wine Trade, by Tim Unwin. This is the book for the wine fanatic in your life—especially if he or she is highly







Engrossing information for the wine fanatic in your life.

cerebral. The chapters are fascinating and unique: "Wine & the vine: symbols of fertility and luxury," "Greek & Roman contributions to viticulture," "Alcohol & alcoholism in 17th

century Europe." Works of this depth are not everyone's cup of tea, and of course, one doesn't need to read *Wine and the Vine* to understand what's going on in a good glass of Cabernet. Still, once you've mastered the "what, where, and why" of grapes and wine, a book like this is the next intellectual step.

Wine Lover's Companion, by Ron Herbst & Sharon Tyler Herbst. A copy of Sharon Tyler Herbst's Food Lover's Companion sits in my kitchen and is dog-eared from use. I've found it indispensable in answering my questions about food. This companion volume is devoted to wine. Like the Oxford Companion, the book is arranged alphabetically. But whereas the Oxford Companion's strength is its depth and enological precision, Wine Lover's is appealing

because of its "in a nutshell" approach. This is the perfect reference for anyone who, in 30 seconds, wants to understand the difference between Chablis and Chardonnay, or wants to know if Châteauneuf-du-Pape is a wine or a place—or both.



Perfect quick-reference wine guide.

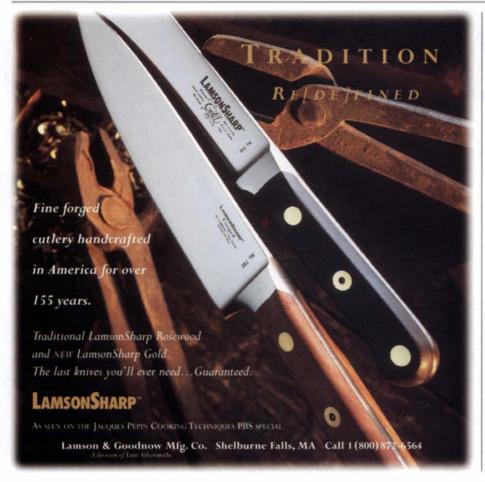
PUBLISHING INFORMATION

The Oxford Companion to Wine, Jancis Robinson, ed. Oxford University Press, 1994. \$49.95, hardcover; 1088 pp. ISBN 0-19-866159-2. The World Atlas of Wine, 4th ed., by Hugh Johnson. Simon & Schuster, 1994. \$50, hardcover; 298 pp. ISBN 0-671-88674-6.

The Wine Atlas of California, by James Halliday. Viking, 1993. \$50, hardcover; 389 pp. ISBN 0-670-84950-2.

Wine and The Vine, by Tim Unwin. Routledge, 1991. \$65, hardcover; 366 pp. ISBN 0-415-03120-6. Wine Lover's Companion, by Ron Herbst & Sharon Tyler Herbst. Barron's, 1995. \$11.95, softcover; 644 pp. ISBN 0-8120-1479-0.

Karen MacNeil, a wine and food writer, teacher, and consultant, is the author of the forthcoming Wine Primer (Workman Books). ◆





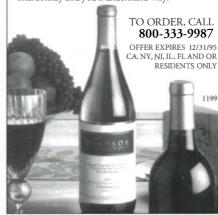
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An extraordinary spice that has been adopted by cooks all over the globe



are relatively similar. Dark green pods have been ovendried; light green cardamom has been air-dried; and white cardamom has been bleached with hydrogen peroxide.

I've long since given up tangling with old-fashioned Scandinavian ladies who insist that white cardamom is the only true cardamom, or at least the only one worth cooking with. We've agreed that, since it's by far the most expensive type of cardamom, only the biggest, plumpest pods are used, meaning there are fewer of the less desirable tan seeds inside and more of the preferred black ones. The bleaching process, which can render the seeds sterile, dates to the early days of the spice trade, when growers used it as a way to prevent their highly lucrative plants from leaving home and putting down roots elsewhere. Today, tradition is the only reason for whitening the pods.

Black cardamom, sometimes called big cardamom, is not a true cardamom, but a close cousin. Grown mainly in Africa, black cardamom pods are much larger than the green—almost an inch long, compared to ½-inch green cardamom pods. They are dried by a process that lends

Illustration: Redenta Soprano. Photo: Susan Kahr



them a pleasant smokiness. Originally cultivated as a cheap substitute for the real thing, black cardamom's peppery intensity has won many fans of its own. Black cardamom plays an essential role in the dishes of northern India and Pakistan and is sometimes used in place of true cardamom in the traditional garam masala spice mix. Throughout Africa, cooks use it to the exclusion of green cardamom to

season much of their food.

Cardamom thrives in the heat of the equator. India, Sri Lanka, and, more recently, Central America all grow cardamom for commercial use. In fact, some of the world's finest cardamom is from Guatemala. The plants, which prefer the shade of tall tropical trees, can grow from 8 to 15 feet high. Shoots that spring from the base of the plant hold the pods. The best-quality cardamom is harvested when the pods have grown as large as they can without splitting and are close to bursting with aromatic dark, almost black, slightly sticky seeds.

Pods, seeds, or powder. You can buy green cardamom as pods, whole seeds (called decorticated cardamom), or ground. Seeds and ground cardamom are less expensive and

easier to use than whole pods, but they lose their flavor faster. The pods themselves have a delicate, slightly floral taste sought by some cooks. They are sometimes included in ground cardamom labeled "pods ground entire." Ground cardamom that is only seeds, labeled "no shell material," has a more intense flavor.

ground cardamom will remain aromatic for as long as a year; whole cardamom pods, indefinitely.

A strong-flavored spice demands a skillful hand. Quite bluntly, cardamom is not one of the team players of the spice world. A fair amount of restraint is required to combine it with other spices.

Cardamom pods have a slightly floral taste; the seeds are more intensely flavored.

Pilafs and other savory dishes that require a less spicy flavor are best seasoned with crushed pods, which are removed after cooking. For baked goods and desserts, ground cardamom is the easiest to use.

Black cardamom is sold only as whole pods, which can be used whole, crushed, or ground. Stored in a glass jar in a cool, dry place, good-quality Indian cooks use the intensely flavored spice with great subtlety in dishes ranging from lamb vindaloo to rice pudding. In northern Europe, cardamom is a popular baking spice, particularly in Scandinavia, where its aromatic intensity stands out in many of that region's traditional cakes and cookies. Cardamom occasionally turns up in

Cardamom in its many forms. Clock-wise from top left: black, white and green cardamom pods, ground cardamom, and decorticated cardamom (whole seeds).

recipes for Swedish meatballs and German sauerbraten as well. But no one uses as much cardamom as the Arabs. Three-quarters of the world's finest Guatemalan cardamom goes to the Middle East, where it is used to make a drink called *gawah*—intense, dark-roasted coffee mixed with huge amounts of cardamom.

The price may be high, but a little is all you need. One of the most expensive spices (as much as \$64 per pound), cardamom ranks third in price behind saffron and vanilla. All share similar reasons for their high price intensive hand labor, the broad growing space required, and scarcity of high-quality product that is in great demand. But the price can be deceiving. Just a few dollars' worth of the spice can get the average baker or curry maker through a year. Cardamom's strong flavor means that a small amount is all that's needed to make its aromatic presence known.

Pamela Penzey Moog travels extensively to buy the spices she blends and sells at the mail-order spice business, Penzeys, Ltd. in Waukesha Wisconsin.

CALENDAR

Send event announcements to Calendar, Fine Cooking,
PO Box 5506, Newtown,
CT 06470-5506. Be sure to include dates, a complete address, and the phone number to call for more information. Listings are free, but restricted to events of direct interest to cooks. The deadline for entries in the April/May issue is January 1.

Fine Cooking is looking for an associate editor with a strong cooking background. Candidates should have magazine experience as well as recipe development and editing skills; photo skills a plus. Frequent travel. We offer a competitive salary, excellent benefits, and a pleasant work environment. Send a letter and resumé to Personnel Department, The Taunton Press, 63 S. Main St., Newtown, CT 06470-5506.

CALIFORNIA

Culinary Competition—December 12, Palm Springs Riviera Resort, Palm Springs. Culinary competition in the cold display category, sponsored by the American Culinary Federation and open to participation by the public. Deadline: December 8. For information, call Loy Soleta at 619/322-7000 ext. Kitchen or 619/320-7240.

Mendocino Celebrity Chefs & Kitchens Tour—December 10, Mendocino Coast. Meet six well-known chefs and taste their holiday appetizers in the beautiful kitchens of six private homes on the Mendocino Coast. For more information, call 800/726-2780.

Twelve Days of Christmas—December 6–17, Meadowood Resort, Napa Valley. A holiday retreat with dinners featuring Napa Valley wines and one-of-a-kind menus prepared by twelve celebrity chefs. All dinners will be served in the historic Cask Room at Greystone Cellars, the new West Coast branch of the Culinary Institute of America. Call 800/458-8080.

COLORADO

Cooking Classes—Cooking School of the Rockies, Boulder. December 5: Secrets of Successful Entertaining with event planner and culinary writer James Moore. December 6: Holiday Champagne Tasting and Food Matching with master sommelier Wayne Belding. December 7: French Cakes The Easy Way with cookbook author and pastry chef Bruce Healy. January 10, 17, 31 & February 7: Delicious, Flavorful, Low-Fat, Low-Sodium Cooking with chef and cookbook author Adam Devito. January 24: A Venetian Dinner with chef and awardwinning cookbook author Giuliano Hazan. January 25: Quick and Simple Italian Cookery, also with Giuliano Hazan. Call 303/494-7988.

CONNECTICUT

Cooking classes—Prudence Sloane's Cooking School, Hampton. December 3: The Hanukah Feast. Culinary traditions of the Festival of Lights. December 9: Tools of the Trade—Knife Skills Workshop. December 12: Two Spectacular Do-Ahead Christmas Desserts. Call 203/455-0596.

Cooking classes—Hay Day Cooking School, Ridgefield and Westport; also Scarsdale, NY. December 5 & 7: Spectacular Holiday Hors d'Oeuvres with cookbook author Lauren Groveman. December 11: Washington's Restaurant Jean-Louis. With Chef Jean-Louis Palladin. January 15: When Company's Coming with Anne Willan. January 16: Comfort Foods of Paris, also with Anne Willan. For locations and details, call Nicole Courtemanche at 203/221-0100.

FLORIDA

7th Annual South Florida International Wine & Food Festival—Doral Ocean Beach Resort, Miami Beach. January 25: Champagne Reception with dinner prepared by famous chefs from award-winning restaurants, with finewines and premium cigars. January 26: Grand Food & Wine Tasting, featuring more than 200 top international wines and food from some of South Florida's best restaurants. January 27: Luncheon and seminars on wine and food; Gala Black Tie Charity Dinner. January 28: Grand Finale Champagne Brunch. Call 800/20-EVENT.

NEW YORK

Classes—New York University Center for Foods & Food Management, New York. December 2: Restaurants that Work with Martin Dorf. December 2, 3, 9, 10: Food Styling for the Camera with Delores Custer. December 14: The Newest in Special Occasion Wines: Outstanding Values with John Sheldon. Call Marjorie Possick at 212/998-5588.

Cuisine Magic 1996—January 14, Omni Albany Hotel, Albany. Culinary competition and tasting sponsored by the American Culinary Federation, regional taste category. For information, call Michael LoPorto at 518/273-8546.

Dinners at the James Beard Foundation—New York City. December 1: All Truffle Dinner with Hubert Des Marais (of the Ocean Grand Hotel, Palm Beach, FL). December 7: A Country Inn's Christmas with Peter De Jong (of the Beaufort Inn, Buford, SC). December 10: Nutcracker Tea with Maury Rubin (of City Bakery, NYC). December 12: An Italian Christmas with Alan Tardi (of Follonico, NYC). December 21: French Christmas Celebration with Bertrand Verneioul (of the Café Pierre, NYC). December 31: New Year's Eve Celebration with André Halston (of the Ritz Carlton, Philadelphia). January 9: Great New York Chefs with Jean-Georges Vongerichten (of Vong, NYC). January 23: A Country Inn's Dinner with Tim Kelly (of the Painted Table, Seattle). Call 212/675-4984 or 800/36-BEARD.

Top Cooks & Their Books—One City Cafe, New York City. Intimate fivecourse dinners featuring the signature dishes of well-known chef/ authors, who will share their expertise with guests and sign copies of their books. December 4: A Celebration of Richard Sax. Editor and long-time friend Rux Martin will talk about Richard, winner of a 1995 James Beard Book Award and author of Classic Home Desserts. Dinner will end with four of Richard's favorite desserts. December 11: Mimi Sheraton, foodcritic and author of The Whole World Loves Chicken Soup. For reservations, call 212/533-7600.

NEW MEXICO

Cooking classes—Jane Butel Cooking School, Albuquerque. December 5: Adobe Basics IV—Side Dishes. December 7: Gifts from a Southwestern Kitchen. December 9: New Mexican Christmas Eve Fiesta. December 28: New Mexican Cooking III. Call 505/243-2622 or 800/473-TACO.

PENNSYLVANIA

Ice Cream Short Course—January 8–18, Nittany Lion Inn, Penn State University Park Campus. Intensive ice-cream making course, including the science and technology of ice cream. For information, call 814/865-8301.

RHODE ISLAND

Distinguished Visiting Chef Cooking Demonstration & Dinner—January 31, Johnson & Wales University, Providence. Demonstration by Tom Pedersen, executive chef for the Radisson hotel chain, and a dinner featuring his signature dishes. For info on the demonstration, call Linda Beaulieu at 401/598-2919. For dinner reservations, call Susan Lipscomb at 401/598-2973.



TENNESSEE

11th Annual Gingerbread World Competition, Display & Silent Auction—December 3–17, Loews Vanderbilt Plaza Hotel, Nashville. Contest entry deadline: December 1. December 2, 3, 7, 9: Children's Gingerbread Workshops. December 3: Family Holiday Brunch. December 10: Celebrity Storytelling with Amy Grant. For information, call Bonnie Lawry at 615/460-4035.

VERMONT

Seminars & dinners—New England Culinary Institute. January 23: At the Essex Junction campus: a wine-tasting seminar featuring Sakonnet wines, followed by a wine and food pairing dinner with Sakonnet wines at The Inn at Essex. January 24: The same events described above will be held at the Montpelier campus. For registration for both seminars, call 802/223-9278. For reservations for the dinner at The Inn at Essex, call 802/879-5471, ext. 589. For reservations for the dinner at the Montpelier campus, call 802/229-9202.

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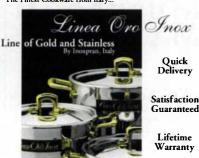
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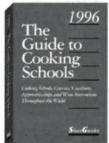
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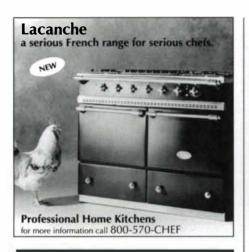
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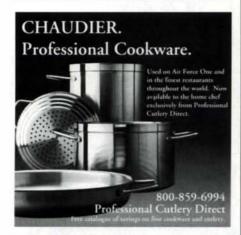


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Recipe (analysis per serving)	Page	Cal	ories	Protein	Carb	D-1	Fats (g	9)	7.0	Chol	Sodium	Fiber	Notes
		total	fat	(g)	(g)	total	sat	mono	poly	(mg)	(mg)	<i>(g)</i>	
Spiced Nuts	31	210	81%	4	8	19	2	7	2	5	35	3	per ¼ cup
Potato Frittata	31	240	54%	14	13	15	6	6	1	330	340	2	
Pears & Arugula Wrapped in Prosciutto	32	60	26%	5	5	1.5	.5	0.5	0	10	470	1	per piece
Apple-Ginger Streusel Coffee Cake	32	360	34%	6	55	13	7	4	2	805	290	1	$\frac{1}{12}$ of cake
Basic Butter Cookies	34	45	52%	0	5	2.5	1.5	1.0	0	5	15	0	per cookie
Sandwich Cookies with Ganache	35	150	61%	2	15	10	6	3	0	20	40	0	per cookie
Butter Cookies with Royal Icing	35	50	46%	1.	6	2.5	1.5	1.0	0	5	15	0	per cookie
Triple-Ginger Cookies	35	80	27%	1	14	2.5	1.5	1.0	0	10	45	0	per cookie
Lime Zest Wafers	35	30	57%	0	3	2.0	1.0	0.5	0	5	5	0	per cookie
Yorkshire Pudding	38	150	47%	5	14	8	4	3	0	65	170	1	
Traditional English Roast Beef	39	530	50%	61	1	30	12	12	1	180	460	0	
Roast Beef Gravy	39	40	75%	1	2	3.5	1.5	1.5	0	5	140	0	per ¼ cup
Roasted Winter Vegetables	47	260	39%	4	39	11	2	8	1	0	1000	8	
Cod with Mustard-Tarragon Crust	49	210	24%	34	3	5	3	1	1	90	720	0	
Salmon with Horseradish-Potato Crust	49	260	37%	35	4	11	2	5	3	80	620	1	
Halibut with Pine Nut & Parmesan Crus	t 49	360	53%	38	4	21	4	9	6	65	770	2	
Spicy Garlic Parsnip Fries	52	230	63%	2	22	16	3	9	3	0	190	6	
Parsnip, Carrot & Ginger Soup	52	180	30%	5	25	6	1	3	2	0	420	6	
Parsnip & Pecan Sour Cream Muffins	53	320	46%	5	41	16	8	6	2	65	370	2	per muffin
Ciabatta	57	70	0%	3	15	0	0	0	0	0	160	0	1/20 of loaf
Creamy Polenta	63	150	46%	7	16	8	5	2	0	25	570	1	
Gorgonzola Polenta	63	300	62%	11	19	20	8	6	5	35	900	2	
Polenta Lasagna	64	420	52%	19	32	25	11	10	2	60	1660	6	
Polenta Pudding	64	400	41%	10	54	18	8	8	1	110	120	2	
Rum-Raisin Napoleon	72	880	67%	9	62	66	39	20	3	370	230	1	

The nutritional analyses have been calculated by a registered dietitian at The Food Consulting Company of San Diego, California. When a recipe gives a choice of ingredients, the first choice is the one used in

the calculations. Optional ingredients and those listed without a specific quantity are not included. When a range of ingredient amounts or servings is given, the smaller amount or portion is used.

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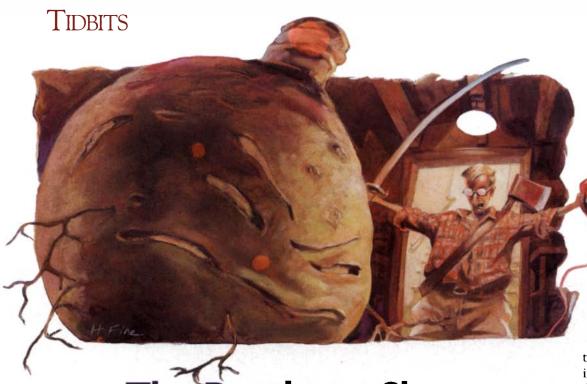
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The Rutabaga Slayer

amily members have many roles at Christmas. There's The Carver of the Turkey, The Baker of All Pies, and He Who Gets Stuck with the Dishes. My mother was the high priestess—The Roaster of the Turkey and Stirrer of the Most Lumpless Gravy. My father's role was small but crucial toour menu, which always included rutabaga.

Webster defines the rutabaga as a turnip with a very large, yellowish root. This is like calling Siberia a place with chilly winters. The rutabaga is a big, tough vegetable that protects itself from predators by imitating a bowling ball. If you do capture one, it will play dead until you try to cut it, when it will suddenly reawaken and seize the knife. You now have a hostile vegetable with a weapon.

My father, however, could vanquish the mighty rutabaga. I never learned quite how—but I do know it involved a bench vise, a hatchet, and something called a Skilsaw. Eventually, he'd emerge

from the basement—his face glowing with the pride of a man who had triumphed over nature—holding a pot of rutabaga pieces. Mom would boil them, mash them, and serve them with butter.

Hosting my first Christmas, I knew I had to make a rutabaga. On Christmas Eve, my friend John and I hauled a rutabaga into the kitchen, where John gathered up all his machismo and went after it with an ax. The ax glanced off the side of the rutabaga, hurtling it off the counter and into the stove. The stove was badly dented; the rutabaga was unscathed.

Above the fireplace in our cottage, we displayed a decorative sword festooned with colored ribbons. We took it down and tested it for sharpness. It passed. We braced the rutabaga between two unabridged dictionaries on the flagstones, and John raised the sword over his head and slammed it down like a samurai. The blade penetrated halfway into the granite flesh

of the rutabaga. John raised the sword, rutabaga and all, and swung it in my direction. "You take the handle. I'll pull the rutabaga." But I had turkey grease on my hands, and John wound up in the wood basket with the rutabaga against his stomach, impaled

My father could vanquish the mighty rutabaga—with a bench vise, a hatchet, and a Skilsaw.

by the sword. He looked like a 200-pound hors d'oeuvre.

"I'll pull it out myself," he gasped.

"I'm calling 911."

"I will not let strangers see me with a sword and a rutabaga stuck in my gut," he yelled, staggering to his feet. He leaned over and tried to hook his toe into the handle of the sword to pull it out with his foot. The sword and the rutabaga toppled to the floor.

"So...are you eviscerated?" I asked casually.

"It was stuck in my belt buckle."

"Let's make something else. Peas. Tiny, delicate petite Le Sueur peas." "Peas hell. We'll have rutabaga. That rutabaga."

He grabbed the sword and the rutabaga and swung them in an arc over his head and down onto the floor, where the sword finished its cut and reduced the rutabaga to two perfect hemispheres. We gathered up these spinning remains. Then we sliced, peeled, boiled, and mashed them, and served them gleefully the next day.

We have since learned that the best way to approach the recalcitrant rutabaga is to start with a thin slice—a mere sliver-then another and another. It works. But can I share this secret with family or friends? No way. John isn't about to let me dilute his mythic role. No, he carries the rutabagas to the cellar, shouts and curses, whirs the power tools, and then lifts a few weights to get his face red and sweaty. Finally he staggers up the stairs with a look of triumph and a pan of defeated rutabaga chips. At dinner, he recounts the legend of that first rutabaga. Young nephews stare at him with eyes as wide as, well, rutabagas, and dream of their first triumph; my father gets misty and reminisces about rutabagas gone by. Yes, this is John's moment. He is The Rutabaga Slaver.

—Valerie Lutters, New Milford, Connecticut ◆

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